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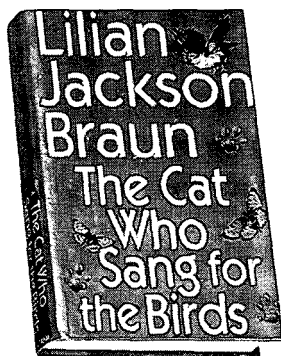
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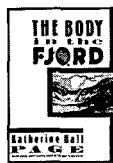
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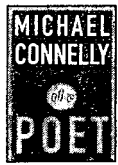
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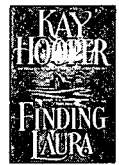
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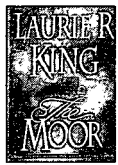
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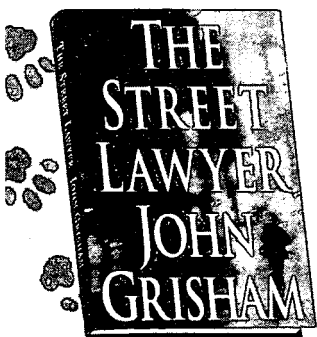
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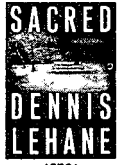
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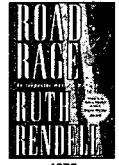
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THE SCREAM

by Dorothy Salisbury Davis

Sally had called him a "mother's boy" when he wanted to leave the party at eleven. It hurt and angered him, but what angered him most was that he hadn't left right then. He stayed on, as though that was going to change her feelings toward him. She'd turned her attention to guys he didn't even know and didn't think she did. She said she'd hitch a ride in one of the other cars. Now he was really late. He drove up the ravine trail furiously, scattering stones and gravel, ripping through the bramble. Midnight wasn't late for that gang, even on a school night, even though they'd lost the beer to the cops who had intercepted them on the way down. He had an old-fashioned mother who pretended she wasn't a single parent. Sometimes she told people her husband was away on business. But sometimes, when she and David were alone, she would call him the man of the house and say how much she depended on him.

As soon as he cleared the park drive he opened up the Chevy. He'd got in the habit of worrying about his mother when he didn't get home on time. This angered him, too. What he worried about was her worrying about him, and it made him feel tied up. Or down. He kept flooring the accelerator until he turned off the highway onto a two-way shortcut via the old County Road.

He thought of Sally and the guy who'd been trying to make out with her when David took off. He was a wimp. David hated him. Sally seemed to like wimps. She had an overload of energy and breasts like ice cream cones. He hit top speed again. Nobody used the County Road except the locals. With not a car in sight, he reached into his breast pocket and fished out the orange packet. He rolled down the window thinking, One more for the road: His joke on himself. He had yet to use one of the damn things in a real situation, yet to suggest to Sally or any other woman that he had one in his pocket. He threw it out against the wind and felt immediately that it might have blown back into the car. He glanced around. In less than a breath of time he turned back to the road. A car, dead ahead, no lights, had stopped half on the pavement, half on the shoulder. He swerved across the middle-line, then, starting to careen, he let the wheel take control. The Chevy swung back and he saw the woman coming around from in front of the parked car. He saw her scream. Didn't hear it. Her face, the mouth wide, seemed to zoom at him. He pulled the car away from her and fought to control it by acceleration. The woman flung herself against her car, sandwiched between it and the Chevy when he passed. He got command, his hands frozen around the steering wheel. He was faint with fear, but he hadn't hit her. He was sure of it. He would have heard something, a thump, a noise, something, if he had. He was sure of it. He did not stop.



"Young people and spirituality, and the strains the modern world has put on both, are recurring themes in Dorothy Salisbury Davis's work," says William DeAndrea in *Encyclopedia Mysterosa*. He might have been describing Ms. Davis's new story for *EQMM*, her first for us since 1991. The popular author debuted in *EQMM* in 1953. †

"Davie, is that you? Are you just getting in?"

"I've been downstairs for a while," he lied. He squeezed the words through a dry, tight throat.

"Then you should have finished your studies before you went out."

"I know." At her bedroom door he said, "Good night, Mother."

"I need a kiss," she said, and when he brushed her forehead with his lips, "Now I'll be able to sleep."

He drew the door almost closed. The cat wriggled through and followed him down the hall. It wove itself between his legs in the bathroom and then rubbed against him when he sat on the edge of his bed to take off his sneakers. As soon as he removed one, the cat jumped it and worried its head into the toe.

"Allie, it stinks!" He buried his face in the crook of his arm. "Like me."

He woke up before he finished the Our Father. In the next second the spiraling plane would have hit the ground. He lay, abruptly wide awake, knowing what he had dreamt, and wondered why he had not been scared. He'd felt calm and oblivious to the other passengers, who were also about to die. "Forgive us our trespasses . . ." Suddenly he remembered the face he'd kept seeing while he lay in bed last night, unable to fall asleep, the scream he couldn't hear. If he looked at the wall now he would see it again. If he closed his eyes he would see it. He wrenched himself out of bed. Every bone in his body ached. Every muscle was taut.

His mother called to him from downstairs wanting to know if he was up. She had called him before and he had fallen back into sleep, into the dream. He leaned over the banister and shouted down that he'd be ready in ten minutes. In the shower he told himself that he must go back to where it happened. What good would it do now? He couldn't have hurt her. She'd have been scared, fainted maybe. But how could he not have hurt her? With him going at that speed, the wind could have pulled her to him. But he'd have known it, felt it. And if he had, wouldn't he have stopped? He had not stopped. That was why he had to go back.

David resembled his mother. He was slight, with straight, tawny hair, very blue eyes. The sharp, delicate features made him feel that he looked like a choir boy. He'd got in the habit of pulling down the corners of his mouth. Tough guy, his mother said of it once, which was exactly what he wanted. The one thing he didn't want now was his mother getting a good look at his bloodshot

eyes. "I had an awful dream before I woke up," he said. It might explain or distract.

She sat, her chin in her hand, and watched him pour milk shakily into his cornflakes, not seeming to notice anything different in him from other mornings. She was dressed for work, waiting for her ride to arrive any minute. "Want to sort it out?" she said.

"I was going down in a plane crash. There were lots of people screaming, but I wasn't scared." He'd made up the screaming part. He couldn't remember them screaming.

"What else do you remember? Little things," she coaxed. She liked to interpret his dreams for him. She had done it since he was a little kid, a game he kind of liked.

Now he wished he hadn't mentioned this one. "I woke up before we crashed."

"If you weren't scared, what were your feelings?"

He shrugged. "Like, philosophical. I said the Our Father." He pushed away from the table. "Mom, I got to go. Professor Joseph always calls first on the kids who come in at the last minute. We call him Sneaky Joe."

"You miss your father. That's what your dream's about."

"Yeah." He got up. The cornflakes barely touched, he put the dish on the floor for the cat.

"Why don't you write and tell him that, Davie?"

Again he shrugged.

"I know you could tell him things you don't tell me," his mother said.

"Okay, Mom. I'll do that." He was desperate to get away from her. He couldn't even manage the usual peck on the cheek.

"Are you going to be all right to drive?" she called after him.

"Why not?" Each day he drove the twenty miles to St. Mary's College, picking up two classmates on the way.

"You're jittery. You're working too hard. You ought not to work late at night. Your sleep's important, Davie. You're still growing."

"Yes, Mother. Yes!" If only her ride would come. He wanted to call his passengers and tell them they had to get to school on their own that morning. It would commit him to going back there.

She called after him: "I have pot roast in the Crock-Pot if you'd like to bring someone home to dinner."

He was shocked at the scratches on the fender and the door when he first saw the car in daylight. It must have happened going down or coming up from the water's edge. Going down, he'd

been concentrating on Sally's hand getting nearer and nearer his thigh. And then the sheriff's patrol had stopped the three cars and confiscated the beer. The cops had made them get out of the cars, and they asked each one if they had any joints or other dope. They hadn't searched anybody. Sally said afterward that if the deputy had laid a finger on her, her father would have had his badge by morning. Some of the other boys went to St. Mary's, too, which had turned coeducational recently. Like him, they were day students, but they were upperclassmen. One of the deputies had flashed his torch in David's face and then asked to see his driver's license. He couldn't believe David was a college student. Sally tittered. She didn't say it then, but later—mother's boy. He took a chamois to the scratches and turned up the local station on the radio. The only traffic incident reported was a three-car crash on the interstate. He'd bet no one ran away from that one.

The macadam was still silvery from the overnight frost when he turned into County Road. Tire tracks crisscrossed and then disappeared where the sun's first rays skimmed the surface. The temptation to turn back was getting to him. He made himself go on, one road sign to the next. He reached the underpass beneath the suburban railway. Then he lost his nerve. He turned around beneath the arch and headed for school.

It was too late to go to his first class. In the library he asked at the desk if he could see the *County Sentinel*, not yet on the shelf. The librarian wanted to know if he had a hot number. The lottery. "Look, you never know," David said.

He went through the paper column by column. "Crime Watch": "The sheriff's patrol reported no arrests, significant crimes, or serious accidents." He was disappointed. Crazy, but that was how he felt. He returned the paper and headed for his second class. It struck him then: The accident on the interstate had not been reported either. It was too soon. But not for it to have been on the radio. Could that mean that nothing very serious had happened on County Road? But something had happened. Suppose he never found out. He didn't think he'd ever forget it. But say that woman wasn't supposed to be where she was, it was a stolen car maybe, and say that by a miracle she wasn't hurt, or suppose there was someone in the car she wasn't supposed to be with, say someone dragged her into the car afterward. Maybe she *was* hurt. Or dead. If she had banged her head, say, on her own car, he wouldn't have heard that, would he? Just because he hadn't heard anything didn't

mean nothing happened. All morning he kept turning over in his mind different possibilities, knowing that only one of them, and maybe none, was so. His imagination would not let go. He was such a good liar, why couldn't he lie to himself? He ought to keep track of the lies he told. A priest once said to him about confession, "Don't simply pick a number as though it's a lottery." Which was exactly what he used to do.

Lying was his big problem from when he was a little kid. It always surprised him that people, his mother, for example, took for granted he was telling the truth. Or did they pretend, too? Pretend they believed him. During his first session with the St. Mary's student advisor they'd had a long talk on why people lied, even professional liars like spies, and what it did to a man's character to lie habitually. Women did it for fun, the advisor said, and then added quickly that he was making a joke. David wasn't sure. But he wound up taking as his elective the Christian Ethics course the advisor recommended. His mother was pleased. Someone told her that Father Moran would be supportive. Of a student with a father absent from home, David supposed, though nobody said it to him.

He kept making up excuses to himself to skip ethics class that afternoon. He didn't want to blurt out something he couldn't explain. The kids taking the class were hound dogs on the scent for heresy. Some of them had flunked out of seminary and were going through a kind of rehab. Father Moran paid them special attention. The Church needed more priests and nuns to make up for the dropouts. Father Moran was one of the few religious on the faculty and probably wouldn't have lasted at St. Mary's till now if there wasn't the shortage.

David kept returning to his car all morning to catch the local news on the radio. He was nauseous, and in the mirror he looked as pale as a boiled potato. In the mirror, behind his own face, was the image of a man approaching, looking, David thought, at the license numbers of the cars as he worked his way through the parking lot. David felt in his bones the man was looking for him. He switched off the radio.

The stranger wore an out-of-date polo coat that was too big for him and a slouch hat that made his face look small, his features pinched, mean. He stooped to look in at David and took a quick survey of the inside of the car at the same time. He pushed his hat

back and gestured that he wanted David to roll his window down. Reluctantly David obliged.

The man couldn't smile. The attempt was like a nervous tic. "You're David Crowley, right? I'm Dennis McGraw." He handed David his business card: Dennis Henry McGraw, Attorney-at-law.

"I'm an associate of Deputy Sheriff Addy Muller's. Deputy Muller was on the welcoming committee when you and your friends went down to the beach last night." He gave the tic of a smile. "He could have hauled you in—you know, a public beach. Do you mind if I get in the car with you? It's cold out here."

"I have a class in twenty minutes, Mr. McGraw."

But the man was already lurching around to the passenger side. He took notice of the scratches and pursed his lips to show his awareness. He eased into the seat alongside David. His coat overflowed it. "They say it's going to rain. Feels more like snow. It's a funny time of year for a beach party. Coming up Halloween, I suppose. And privacy's no problem on the beach in October, is it?" Again, the smirk. "Relax, David. We'll get you to your class on time. Addy said it was a long shot, but he remembered you lived in Oak Forest and could have been driving on the County Road last night. . . ."

Once again the lie seemed safer to David. He shook his head.

"The interstate?"

"That's right," David said.

"Well, Addy said it was a long shot. I don't know why anyone would take the County Road unless the interstate was shut down . . . or they had some mischief in mind. About what time was it when you got home?"

David took alarm. He ought not to have lied. He pumped himself up and said, "It's none of your business, mister, and if you don't get out of this car, I'm going to turn you over to the security police."

McGraw spread his hands. "What did I say?"

"I want to know why you're asking me these questions."

"You aren't giving me a chance to tell you."

If David could have stopped his ears, he would have, rather than hear the very thing he wanted to know.

"But there's no point to it if you didn't take the County Road," McGraw went on. "The reason I asked about the time: There was an accident that shut down the interstate for a couple of hours after midnight. Nobody got through going your direction."

David was about to say that he must have got through just ahead,

but he bit his tongue. He might be able to back out now before he got in deeper. "Could I see your identification, Mr. McGraw? Anybody could pick up that business card you showed me."

"Smart boy. I'm like Abe Lincoln, David. I have an office but mostly I carry my business in my hat. All you got to do is call up the sheriff's office and speak to Deputy Addy Muller. He'll tell you who I am."

David drew a deep breath and tried to lie himself out of the lie. "I didn't want to get involved in anything. I mean, you're a lawyer and that generally means trouble."

"I can't argue with you on that, David. I'm the first person my clients call when they get in trouble."

"I did go home by the County Road, but I don't know what time it was. I was supposed to be in by midnight."

"Driving alone, were you?"

"I didn't know many kids at the party. My girlfriend invited me."

"Didn't you take the young lady home?"

"She got a ride from one of the other guys. I don't know what you want from me, but I've got to go now and I want to lock the car."

"Five minutes more?" McGraw said.

"No, sir. I don't know you and I don't see why I should talk to you."

"Then I'll tell you what you should do, David. First chance, drive over to the sheriff's office. You know where that is. Ask for Deputy Muller. He's investigating an incident on the County Road last night. He's looking for witnesses."

And there it was: Something *had* happened. He'd run away from something real. "Okay, I'll do that," David muttered, his voice shaky. Then, realizing what hadn't been said: "Witness to what?"

"If you don't know, you better ask Deputy Muller." McGraw stuck out his hand as though expecting David to shake it. He withdrew it before David had a chance to take or refuse it. "Unless you'd like me to represent you? I'm well thought of in the County Building. It's never a mistake to have legal counsel, David, always a mistake to go it on your own. You told me you went home on the interstate. Why did you tell that little lie? Addy's going to want to know."

David turned the key in the ignition. He wasn't sure what to do—one security guard for the whole campus. He had to get rid of this guy. He was a crook, an ambulance chaser. But he knew something.

"No hard feelings," McGraw said. He opened the car door and

slipped out, pulling his coat after him. It clung to the seat and he had to yank it free. David wanted to laugh. And cry. McGraw stood wriggling, trying to straighten himself inside the oversize garment. David revved the motor and circled fast. There was a terrible familiarity to the whirr of the tires. He did not look back.

The whole class jumped on him when he said he thought Judas Iscariot wasn't as bad as the Christians made him out to be. Maybe he thought of himself as a whistle-blower, that Jesus wasn't good for the Jewish people—"Too much forgiveness—you know, like the woman who committed adultery."

"Money, money, money," students in the back of the room chanted. "He did it for money." It was their way of breaking into David's tirade.

"But he didn't want the money. Look what he did with it!" David didn't know what was happening to him to be shooting off like this. He didn't even know how long he'd been on his feet. Father Moran had settled his backside on the edge of the desk and folded his arms like a fat Buddha. He was enjoying himself. He loved it when his boys got their adrenaline flowing. Always his boys—he hadn't yet got used to the presence of girls in the class. "I don't think Jesus himself was fair to him," David went on. "He knew Judas was in trouble. He was the one who said the disciples should pray 'Lead us not into temptation.' Man, did Judas ever get led into temptation. What I'm saying is, Jesus knew. He knew what was going to happen to Judas. Look what he said to Saint Peter: 'Before the cock crows, you'll deny me three times.' And Peter did. And he cried. So did Judas. He went out and wept bitterly." David lost his train of thought. Actually, it was Peter who went out and wept bitterly.

Father Moran took over. "Well, Crowley. You certainly got our adrenaline flowing. Watch out the devil doesn't catch up with you. He's always on the lookout for a good advocate." The priest shifted his weight, from one buttock to the other. "Tell me, what do you understand to be Iscariot's greater sin—that he betrayed the Lord or that he despaired of being forgiven?"

"Despair is the greatest sin." It was an answer out of his childhood catechism.

"Why?"

"I don't know, Father." He did not want to be quizzed like a ten-year-old. His moment of self-assurance was going down the drain.

The back row all had their hands up. The priest nodded to one of the volunteers.

Then David caught hold of another idea. "But despair is a sin against yourself, isn't it? Being your own judge. Betraying somebody is worse, it seems to me. You're hurting somebody else."

"Mitchell, you're on," the priest said to the volunteer, ignoring David's attempted postscript, except to say, "Thank you, Crowley."

David tried to listen to Mitchell's definition of despair as a sin against hope, and his denunciation of Judas because he had given up hope. It went on and on. David could have put it in one sentence. Somebody had done that, he realized, which was how it came into his mind: Abandon hope, all ye who enter here. Meaning hell.

It looked like the class wasn't going to get back on track until everybody had their say on why Judas was so despicable—the kiss, the pieces of silver; somebody said he was jealous of John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. "I know! He was gay!" one of the girls put in. She covered her mouth and giggled. The giggle was infectious and those around her laughed. David pretended to be amused, but he wasn't. He felt he'd been onto something important and had been cut off before he got to the heart of it. He'd had a question he wanted to ask that he felt would shake up even Father Moran. Now he couldn't remember it.

Between Christian Ethics and his last class, he copied a friend's notes for Twentieth Century French Literature, the class he had missed that morning, but his mind kept going back to Dennis McGraw and what he called "the incident" the sheriff's deputy was investigating. You wouldn't call anything serious an incident, would you? Suppose he found out tomorrow that the screaming person had not been hurt, not the least bit hurt, that the scream was an act, would that mean he was not guilty of anything? Look now: Was guilt a matter of luck? Getting caught was, maybe. Wasn't that why he was in ethics, to learn why getting caught was not part of the moral issue? And wasn't getting caught what he was really afraid of? He didn't care about that woman at all. Not for her own sake. The person he cared about was David Crowley.

He tried to focus on the Valéry poem in which he was supposed to trace the Symbolist influence, but he couldn't concentrate. It was hopeless, and he was supposed to be good in French. David felt as though something inside him was writhing, a stomachful of snakes. The day was almost over, but terrible as it had been, he

dreaded for it to end. He didn't want to go home. He had to talk to someone. For just a minute he wondered if he should have been such a smart-ass with Dennis McGraw. McGraw wanted to talk to him. McGraw knew something. He didn't.

On his way home he thought about his father and what his mother had said at breakfast, how he could tell his father things he couldn't tell her. He was pretty sure she was talking about sex, but if his father was around would he be able to tell him what he'd done, how he'd run away when he might have hurt somebody? He could see his father going out to the car and saying, "Get in, David." He'd order David's mother back into the house and he'd drive straight to the sheriff's office and say, "My son has a statement to make." Even so, David thought, he could tell him sooner than he could tell his mother. What he wanted most was not to have to tell anybody, to wake up and find out it was a dream.

He drove around the block twice before turning into the driveway, in case McGraw or someone from the sheriff's office was waiting for him. He saw no one, and when he parked in front of the garage door, the nearest neighbor was coming out of her house. She waved to him, got into her car, and drove off. Perfectly normal. In the house he got the same feeling of normalcy. It made him uneasy, as if he might step where there was nothing for his foot to land on. There were no messages for him on the answering machine. Even the cat ignored him. He looked up Dennis McGraw in the yellow pages. He'd thought he might not be there, but he was, the address the County Building. Something was real, anyway: Dennis McGraw, attorney-at-law. He had an enemy, David thought. For the first time in his life he had a real enemy. That was crazy. All McGraw wanted was to make a buck out of him. *Unless you'd like me to represent you . . .* But David hadn't admitted anything, except going home on the County Road. McGraw had looked for him because Deputy Muller had a hunch. Oughtn't car license numbers to be available to the police only? Everybody knew the sheriff's office was corrupt. The patrol shouldn't have just taken the beer away last night, they ought to have chased the kids out of the park or arrested them for bringing beer there in the first place. He wondered if any of the other guys had been approached by McGraw. Whoever took Sally home would have had to use the interstate or the County Road; he hadn't thought of that before. They almost certainly had to go that way, and if they had, it would have been after David's trip home.

He hated to call Sally. He was shaky, and if there was anyone he wanted less than his mother to know what he'd done, it was Sally. He kept putting off calling her until it was almost time for his mother to come home, and then he went out and used the nearest public phone.

"I wanted to be sure you got home all right last night," he explained.

"You'd have known by now if I didn't. It was real mean of you, David, to go and leave me with that pack of wolves."

"I didn't leave you! You said . . . whatever you said. It doesn't matter. What happened?"

"What almost happened on the way home was worse. We had to go the County Road—the interstate was closed. . . ."

"I know," David said. "What happened to you, I mean?"

"The guys were fooling around. They're sex fiends, and all of a sudden we almost hit a car parked halfway on the highway. No lights, nobody around, like it died and somebody just left it there."

David saw the whole thing in his mind's eye. "Did you stop?"

"Why should we have? We didn't hit it or anything. But it cooled off Micky's sex urge. When we got to Oak Forest, he dropped me at our driveway and took off."

If the car was still there later, what did it mean? What had happened to the woman?

"If I didn't see it," David said, the words of denial slipping out, "you must have come home a lot later than me."

"Not much. I kind of agitated to get us on the road. I'm sorry I said what I did, David. You shouldn't be so sensitive. Women can be frustrated too, you know. You're not crude like those other guys, and I admire that. I admire a lot about you."

"Thanks," he murmured.

"What do I have to do to make up for what I said? Ask you for another date? I was the one who asked you last night, you know."

"I'll call you real soon, Sally."

"I go back to school on Sunday." She was on midterm break.

"I'll call you," he said again.

"Okay, David. Thanks for calling." The phone clicked off.

Now he had hurt her, but he couldn't help it. He stood in the booth after hanging up and tried to find the words with which he could tell Sally what had happened to him. It went fine until he had to say, I didn't stop. They hadn't stopped either, but they'd not seen the screaming woman.

A man waiting to use the phone pushed open the door. "Do you always go into a phone booth when you want to talk to yourself?"

After an early dinner at the kitchen table David attacked his class assignments. He surprised himself with what sounded to him like a great exposition of the Valéry poem. It felt good, as though he'd made some kind of reparation in getting it done. He took it in to where his mother was writing letters and read it to her. He'd been pretty quiet at dinner and she hadn't fussed or probed. He was making up.

She listened thoughtfully. Then, out of a clear sky, she said: "Would you like a year of study in France if it could be managed?"

David was stunned. It was as though she had said she no longer needed him. He'd been thinking all along that he was tied to her for life, and now it turned out she felt she was tied down by him. Maybe she had a man he didn't even know about, somebody at the bank. . . . A tumult of alarms possessed him.

"Well?" she prompted.

"Yeah, sure. I mean, that's a third-year alternative and I'm only a freshman."

"Only a freshman," she repeated. "You put yourself down, Davie. You shouldn't do that. The essay is very good."

"It isn't long enough to call an essay."

"Nevertheless. Would you like to read the poem itself to me?"

He was on his way to get the book when the phone rang. His mother called out to let the machine take it for now. He pretended not to hear her. All evening, except for when he lost himself in the poem, he had anticipated something heavy about to happen. Nevertheless, when he heard McGraw's voice, his heart gave a sickening thump.

"David, I hope I'm not interrupting your dinner. We need to make a date, you and I. Tonight is convenient for me, or first thing in the morning."

"No," David said. "It's not convenient for me."

"Then you must make it convenient. It's not a matter of choice, young man. Are you with someone now so that you can't talk?"

"My mother's home," David murmured.

"Well now, sooner or later, you will want to involve her. Maybe not. That's not my business. Let's meet somewhere in the morning. I would say my office, but it's being decorated. Unavailable, really. And I don't want to meet in your car again."

We're not conspiring thieves, are we?"

"David?" his mother called inquiringly from the study.

"I'll be in in a minute, Mother." To McGraw, he said, "You can come here in the morning, but not before eight-thirty." It was his mother's turn to drive. She'd leave by eight o'clock.

McGraw repeated the time and checked David's address. He had it right.

Returning, book in hand, to where his mother was waiting, David explained, "I got some scratches on my car going down to the beach last night. A guy's going to paint them for me."

"Have it done by a professional, David. I'll help you pay for it."

"Great," he said.

"Not everything is great," she said. Then: "Shall we put off the poem until another time?"

McGraw arrived not long after the hall clock struck the half-hour. David had again cut loose his riders. He took the lawyer to the kitchen. McGraw was wearing the same topcoat. He took it off and put it on the back of a chair and perched the hat on top of it. "It's a good thing I make house calls, isn't it? Any coffee left in the pot?"

David poured half a mugful and heated it in the microwave. McGraw was taking inventory of every convenience in the kitchen—like he was pricing it for a yard sale.

He took the coffee black. "Why don't we start with your side of the story first, David—what really happened to you on the way home?"

"I'm not going to tell you anything," David said.

"In that case, hear this," McGraw said. "A farmer whose address is rural box seventeen on the County Road heard a woman scream out in front of his place after midnight last night. It woke him from a sound sleep. He looked out, thought he saw a car stalled on the road, and decided to call the sheriff's patrol. The call was clocked at twelve-twenty. But on account of the accident on the interstate, the patrol didn't pick up on it till daylight. I went out there myself with Addy Muller, drove him, in fact. He was dead on his feet after a double shift. But the farmer was pissed at how long it took the sheriff's men to show up. I'm telling it to you straight, David. . . ."

David didn't say anything. McGraw took a noisy sip of his coffee. "Addy remembered you kids on the beach and figured you might've been heading home about then. He remembered you live in Oak Forest. He asked me if I'd like to look you up while he

made the rounds of the hospitals. You were the one he remembered by name and school. He thought you were too young to be running with that crowd.

"You didn't want to talk to me, David; you didn't show much respect for the truth either. In other words, you were scared. I can see why.

"It turns out the woman was on her way home from work, tired, late, and she had to relieve herself. No traffic that she could see. She pulled halfway off the road, turned off the lights, and went in front of the car. Now wouldn't you like to take it from there?"

David was silent.

"David, there was a witness. You were driving at high speed, came out of nowhere just as she came around from in front of the car. You could have made sausage meat of her, and you didn't even stop."

"I didn't hit her. I know that."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"So what do you think happened to her?"

David shook his head.

"But you didn't care as long as you could get away."

"I did care, but I knew I hadn't hit her."

"You *knew*?" McGraw waited, breathing noisily, a snort.

"What happened to her, mister?" David could feel that terrible tightness in his throat.

"I'm not a doctor," McGraw said.

"Is she all right?"

"I wouldn't say that. Oh, no. But *she* is alive."

David caught the emphasis on "*she*." "You said there was a witness. Were they in the car with her?"

McGraw gave him the sad smirk of a smile. "No, David, *you* are the witness."

He wondered how that could be and then realized he had in effect confessed to McGraw. He'd been trapped. He had trapped himself. And he was all he cared about. Not the woman. She wasn't a real person to him. She was a scream, like a face he'd brought up on the computer screen.

"I want to see her," he said. What he wanted was to *feel* her, to flesh-and-blood feel her.

"You could have seen her at the scene. Now it's up to her whether or when she will see you."

"What am I supposed to do, mister?"

"Exactly what I advised you to do yesterday: Go over to the sheriff's office this morning and give Deputy Muller your statement."

"And if I don't?"

"They'll come and get you, David. I can promise you that. The woman will swear out the warrant for your arrest."

And the arrest would be reported in the *County Sentinel* "Crime Watch." But the woman was alive: Why couldn't he say thank God and mean it? He hated himself for what came into his mind and for saying it, but he did: "What if I asked you to represent me?"

"It's too late for that," McGraw said, sounding regretful.

"You're representing her, aren't you?"

"Such a smart young man. David, would you believe me if I told you I don't wish to represent either of you in a court of law? You will agree surely that you owe the unfortunate woman something simply on the strength of the information we have exchanged here this morning?"

"Isn't this some kind of blackmail, mister?"

"What a dirty word. No, David. I am offering you an honorable solution to something that could be very nasty. It could mess up your life, your career, people knowing you'd run away like that. What I haven't told you till now—the woman was pregnant, David. She miscarried after the accident."

David felt the message like a blow to the stomach. He had trouble getting his breath.

"I think we can call it an accident," McGraw went on, "but in her mind it was murder."

"I'm sorry for her," David said finally, and it wasn't associated with McGraw's mention of murder. It was for something lost.

"Sorrow's too cheap, David. Think about it and after you've seen Deputy Muller, let's talk again. She's a poor, hardworking woman. A settlement would not impoverish your family."

David watched McGraw down the driveway; the coat as he struggled into it swished out like Batman's cape. He tucked it around him as he got behind the wheel of a car marked Sheriff's Office.

The woman was human, David thought, a human being, and the sorrow he felt was for her, not for himself. It was going to be McGraw's word against his, no matter what happened, he reasoned. Not that he was thinking of the lie he could tell to get out of his admission, but he wanted time to think about what he was going to do. He didn't think McGraw would make any move until

he had turned himself in, until he signed something saying he had left the scene where someone might have been hurt due to his reckless speed. He was trying to tell himself the truth, the way it was now. In a way, he had hit the woman, and he wanted to go back and pick her up. He couldn't do that, but if he could find her, he could ask her to listen to him, and he could tell her he was sorry. Murder, he felt sure, was McGraw's word. It was meant to scare him. The funny thing was it didn't, but McGraw still did.

David knew he needed help. Maybe he did need a lawyer, but he just didn't think so. What he needed first was a private detective, something as remote from his experience as a TV melodrama. What he needed was his father. Not available. He'd recommend a lawyer anyway, and in spite of what his mother had said about David's being able to talk to him, he didn't think his father would be able to listen.

He drove to school and got to see Father Moran in his office. The priest shook hands with him, not the usual start of a student interview. He knew a troubled young person when he saw one. He told David to move his chair so the light wouldn't shine in his face.

"I got to thinking after yesterday's brouhaha," the priest said, "one of those what-if questions. What if, after hiding out overnight, Iscariot had showed up at the foot of the cross and said, 'Lord, forgive me.'"

David grinned. There was nothing to say and yet there was a lot.

"What can I do for you, Crowley?"

"I did a bad thing, Father." David told his story, even to having thrown the condom into the wind.

The priest lifted an eyebrow. "Standard equipment," he growled. It was the only comment he made until David was finished. Then, after a few seconds of thought: "And when you find her?"

"I don't know," David said. "I just want her to know I'm sorry for what happened to her."

"Any decent lawyer would advise you against self-incrimination."

"I don't care!" David all but shouted.

"By the grace of God, I'm not a lawyer," the priest said. He took the phone book from the bottom drawer of his desk. "Let's start with the nearest hospital to where this misfortune occurred."

Within the half-hour, he had the name and an address for Alice Moss. When she hemorrhaged with the miscarriage, she had taken herself back to St. Vincent's Hospital. It was where she worked, on the custodial staff.



"If you didn't hear me scream," the woman said after she'd thought about it, "how were you going to hear if something else happened to me?"

"I don't think I wanted to hear anything," David said.

Mrs. Moss scraped a bit of congealed egg from the table with her thumbnail. They sat in the hospital employees' cafeteria, where midafternoon traffic was light. She did not in any way resemble the face behind the scream. Her salt-and-pepper hair hung in a clamp at the back of her head. Her eyes were tired. She seemed confused, slow, but her question was on the mark. She twisted uncomfortably on the metal chair. "I don't like you coming to me like this," she said. "I'd just as soon never know you."

"I'm sorry," David said.

"You said that already and I believe you're telling the truth. But I think you're sorry over something I'm not real sure I feel the same way about. That lawyer got me all confused, telling me how I feel when I don't feel that way at all." She concentrated on ST. MARY'S COLLEGE, the lettering on the breast of his sweater. "David—Mr. Crowley . . ."

"David's fine," he said.

"I'm not saying what I want to say, and maybe I should keep it to myself." She drew a deep breath and looked at him directly. "I didn't want to have a baby at all, but I'm a church person and I felt I had to go through with it. Mind, I could have been killed myself last night, I know that. . . ."

"I do too," David said.

"And maybe that would have been murder, but I still couldn't call the other thing murder. I was thinking when I came back to work this noon: Wasn't I lucky on both counts?"

Before the next Christian Ethics class David told Father Moran about his meeting in the hospital cafeteria.

"Did she forgive you?"

"I think so."

"You're lucky, my lad," the priest said. They reached the classroom door. "I have a word of advice for you, Crowley. One word. . . ." He waited.

"Yes, Father?"

"Abstinence." ●

A WELL-TRAVELED WOMAN

by Donald Olson

Somerset Maugham began one of his South Seas stories with the words, "The wise traveler travels only in imagination," a line I was to recall with deep chagrin after what happened.

It all started one day shortly after a company merger had left me redundant. My friend Winifred called from her cottage down the lane to say I must come to brunch on Thursday to meet the *most* extraordinary woman. Somewhat passive by nature, Winifred was rarely so animated as she sounded that day on the phone. Her rapid elliptical speech left me to decipher the garbled message she was breathless to convey.

"Her name is Serenity Wilkes . . . some sort of travel agent, well not exactly, more a professional tour guide . . . now you're free to make that trip to Sweden you're always going on about . . . she's to lecture at the Viking Lodge . . . all very select and *reasonable*, you wouldn't believe . . . so charming and those ethnic costumes picked up all over the world . . . a very well traveled woman . . ."

She gabbled on about this remarkable woman I really must meet. "And now you've all the time in the world, I shall be most put out, my dear, if you don't show up on Thursday."

Having "all the time in the world" still did not incline me to change my antisocial habits, but I liked Winifred and must confess her ravings about this new acquaintance aroused my curiosity. Sprucing myself up, I drove down the lane that Thursday morning.

Like the narrator of this clever tale, Donald Olson is an American of Swedish descent; and also like his character, he harbored a yen, for some years, to visit his father's homeland. The trip he eventually made no doubt provided some of the seeds for "A Well-Traveled Woman," one of the best of his many wonderful short stories. †

As I rang the bell I could hear through the screen door what sounded like a child's voice bubbling with amusement. I heard the words, "... bartering there in the native quarter, which of course is what one is expected to do ..."

From what Winifred had told me, I'd somehow expected to meet a person as visibly foreign to Fair Grove as a Turkish belly dancer, exuding charm and a worldly air of authority, perhaps wearing one of those "ethnic costumes."

In fact, Serenity Wilkes was a petite creature perhaps between forty and fifty with doll-baby features, big dove-gray eyes, and a sweetly smiling countenance. She wore nothing more exotic than a silver and turquoise necklace and in her swept-back graying blond hair a matching comb.

"And this is the young man I told you about," Winifred introduced us. "He's been pining for years to visit Sweden, and when I told him about your Scandinavian tour he was agog to meet you."

Embarrassed by this overstatement, I could only return the soft pressure of Serenity Wilkes's hand and try to match her sweetly engaging smile.

"Ah, but I could have guessed his origins!" she exclaimed. "Those blue eyes are a giveaway. What part of Sweden did your people come from?"

"My dad's parents came from Varberg. I'm pure Yankee on my mother's side."

"Varberg! In the province of Halland. A charming seaport not far from Gothenburg. You must, of course, not miss it. Our tour is quite flexible, you know."

"If I ever get there," I replied with a laugh. "I'm not even sure it's wise to go. As Wordsworth said in that poem about Yarrow, 'I have a vision of my own, ah why should I undo it?'"

Serenity Wilkes's eyes sparkled merrily up at Winifred, who was a good four inches taller. "Yes! He is precisely the sort of person I love to take abroad. Soul of a poet, I can tell. We're very select, you know. Camaraderie is so important."

Winifred, as a moving force in the Viking Lodge—Fair Grove has a large population of Swedish origin—had arranged for Serenity Wilkes's visit and lecture and had invited to her brunch a half-dozen townsfolk who she felt might be predisposed to sign up for the Scandinavian tour.

Over coffee and quiche and avocado salad, Serenity Wilkes treated us to what I assumed to be a precis of her upcoming lec-

ture-travelogue at the Viking Lodge. Without a doubt her most striking feature was her voice, with its faint, indefinable accent. High-pitched and soft as a child's, it might be likened to the burbling twitter of some very small bird. The phrase "playfully kittenish" comes to mind, although this more aptly describes her manner than her voice. Her enthusiasm was infectious. She possessed the experienced traveler's power to kindle the imagination of the would-be globetrotter.

After Serenity Wilkes and the other guests had departed, I helped Winifred clear the table.

"Well?" she said. "Didn't I tell you she was an extraordinary woman? Didn't you find her charming?"

"Very charming, but what do you know about her? How did she happen to come here of all places?"

"My dear, I invited her, I told you that. Well, let's face it, these poky little bus tours I've arranged for our lodge members over the years are getting a wee bit tiresome. Why not broaden our horizons? I happened to see this little item in the classifieds about a Sunglow Scandinavian Tour and wrote to inquire."

"Sunglow?"

"I assumed it was an agency, but from that I gather Serenity is Sunglow Tours, more or less. My dear, it would be right up your alley. You've always said you wouldn't want to go abroad alone and you'd hate being part of one of those mob tours."

"I take it you're going to sign up?"

Winifred's moon face, under gray unruly bangs, expanded in a broad smile. "I hadn't really planned to but after meeting Serenity I can't wait to set sail."

"Take flight, I hope you mean."

"Yes, of course. So what do you think?"

"I think I'll wait to hear more details. Like how much it'll cost. I noticed she evaded that question."

"Not to me, she didn't. Less than two thousand dollars for the total package, with a seven-hundred-and-fifty-dollar down payment. Is that reasonable or isn't it?"

"For that long a tour? Yes, I'd call it most reasonable."

"And without the hurly-burly of being pushed around like a herd of sheep. Almost a family group. Aren't you excited?"

The lecture at the Viking Lodge was well attended, and on this occasion Serenity Wilkes treated the audience to a fashion show

as well as a travelogue complete with slides and personal reminiscences.

Appearing first in a Spanish costume complete with mantilla and fan, she instantly captured our attention by declaring, "First of all, I must confess I am a fraud! My real name is Tullah Solenivaskaya. I was born in Russia. From a little girl my passion was for the dance. My dream was to be a prima ballerina. It was not to be. After touring Europe with the Kirov for five years I fell victim to—how do I say—political pressures? I wish to leave the country, but it is not permitted. A British diplomat befriended me. He offers to become my husband, in name only, so I can acquire his nationality.

"From England I come to America. Sans husband, sans money. What can I do? What are my gifts? I know languages. I know Europe like—how do you say—the back of my fingers? I say to myself, Americans love to travel. You can guide them, instruct them, share with them these cities you know so well. And I change my name, for now I find happiness. I become Serenity . . ."

Following this snippet of autobiography she took us on a slide tour of various European countries, changing with the speed and skill of an actress from one costume to another, explaining how she had acquired her collection of such garments. When she came to discuss the projected Scandinavian tour she wore a Swedish peasant girl's costume.

I had listened to my share of travelogues but Serenity Wilkes had the ability to create the very atmosphere of the places she described. With the lyrical enthusiasm of the inveterate traveler, she painted picture after picture of the country I'd always wanted so much to visit.

She invited those who wished to learn more about the tour to join her after the lecture downstairs in the lounge. About a dozen of us responded and over coffee were free to ask whatever questions she'd left unanswered, about passports and planes and hotel accommodations, and about the cost, which was, as Winifred had said, more than reasonable.

With her canary-bird laugh she made a joke about Swedish frugality. "Ah yes, I know your reputation as skinflicks!"

"That's *skinflints*, Serenity," an elderly man corrected her with a smile. I'd noticed him as he entered the hall upstairs, fumbling with two canes as he settled himself in a seat near me.

"Thank you, dear Mr. Clayburn," said Serenity Wilkes. "Of

course I know *you* are neither Swedish nor a skinflint." Addressing the rest of us, she added: "Mr. Clayburn has been with me on three of my previous tours."

Clayburn gripped his canes and struggled to rise. "When I learned that Serenity was to be here I drove seventy miles for the pleasure of seeing and hearing her again. I cannot recommend her too highly. She is a delightful and knowledgeable guide. To any of you who may suffer small infirmities that might discourage you from traveling abroad, let me say that Serenity is the most patient and helpful of tour managers."

That such a distinguished but frail-looking gentleman, with the mien of a scholar and that air of confidence one has to admire in the disabled, should vouch for the comforts of travel under the auspices of Serenity Wilkes clearly impressed the group, and when asked for a show of hands of those who might seriously be interested in joining the tour, at least nine hands were raised.

Winifred gave me a discreet nudge. "Raise your hand, raise your hand," she whispered. Dutifully, I did so.

Leaflets were passed out describing the tour in detail. Deposit checks were to be made out to Sunglow Tours and delivered by mail or in person to Serenity Wilkes at the Fair Grove Inn, where she was staying. Ten days hence a get-acquainted cocktail party would be held at the inn for those who'd signed up.

When I dropped Winifred off at the foot of the lane she squeezed my arm and said, "Well, my dear, it took a bit of prodding on my part but at least one of your dreams will come true."

"Let's hope I won't be disappointed," I replied, refusing to share her excitement. "Like Niagara Falls."

She gave me a startled look. "*Niagara Falls?*"

"My folks took me there when I was about eight. I had an image in my mind of looking up at this prodigious cascade that would appear to be falling out of the sky. I remember turning to my mother and saying, 'Is that *it?*'"

"Oh, you're impossible. Always joking."

In fact, I wasn't.

You might say the flight to Sweden crashed without ever leaving the ground, with no fatalities but with serious injuries to pocket-books and pride. I first learned of the disaster when Winifred came pounding on my door the evening before the get-acquainted cocktail party.

"You'd best sit down," she said in her most dramatic crisis tone.

I steered her to a chair, for she was the one who appeared shaken. "Whatever's happened?" I asked.

"Serenity's gone."

"Gone where?"

"To Sweden, for all I know. Or to Timbuktu. Who knows? I called at the inn to see about preparations for the party. The staff knew nothing about any party. They told me Serenity had checked out two days ago. No parting word, no forwarding address." Winifred's usually passive features seemed primed for tears. "My dear, we've been swindled! That frightful, smarmy woman hoodwinked us all. It was nothing but a scam."

"But that's absurd." I recalled Serenity's opening remark at the lecture: *I must confess I'm a fraud*. Would a swindler ever make such a statement? "There must be some explanation."

"Don't be naive. She snookered us right from the start, and I'm the one who'll take the heat. I'm the one who brought her here. I'm the one who organized the whole thing."

"Have you called the police?"

"I haven't called anyone. I came straight here. Do you think we should? Oh God, if it gets in the *paper*!"

I told her not to panic. "Isn't there a chance she might simply have been called away and will return for the party? I suggest we call the others, you know who they are, and meet as planned at the inn, party or no party, and then decide what to do."

Winifred was willing to do anything that might avert a public scandal. We called everyone except Mr. Clayburn, the only out-of-towner who'd signed up for the tour and whom we had no idea how to contact. He would have to wait for the bad news until we were all together.

What should have been a festive pre-*bon voyage* party had more the tone of a wake. The rest of us had had time to absorb the impact of the shock; poor Mr. Clayburn hobbled into the private dining room at the inn with no idea what awaited him. Surprisingly, among the babble of angry voices his was the only one to plead for reason.

"I know the lady better than any of you," he reminded us. "Goodness me, I've accompanied her on three earlier tours, and they were all as aboveboard and pleasurable as one could wish. We mustn't do anything hasty until we're sure there isn't some perfectly logical explanation for her disappearance."

"Like what?" demanded Winifred, who among us most hoped he

could be right. But he could only shrug his bowed shoulders and counsel patience.

"Patience be damned!" cried Mr. Dahlgren, a beefy, pink-faced retired accountant. "You bet we've got to get the cops on to her. The woman bilked us out of our money."

After the clamor of approval had subsided, I looked at Clayburn and said, "You say you know her better than any of us. Precisely how well do you know her?"

Hardly better than the rest of us, it turned out. He seemed vaguely to recall some mention of Chicago as her base of operations, but, like Winifred, he'd first heard of Sunglow Tours through a small ad in his local paper, giving a local post-office box address.

Clayburn's evidence seemed to indicate that Serenity Wilkes had operated a legitimate travel service in the past, which only added to the mystery of her present behavior.

"You can be sure she's covered her tracks," declared the accountant. "It'll take police action to weasel her out."

Winifred deplored the idea of police involvement, while Mr. Clayburn, with a saintly forbearance I had to admire, preferred for the present at least to give Serenity Wilkes the benefit of the doubt. I remained neutral. In the end the will of the majority prevailed. The matter was referred to the local authorities, whose efforts, however, failed to produce any leads to Serenity; she had vanished without a trace.

None of us had lost a fortune, only our deposits, and perhaps we had learned a lesson. Winifred was spared the shame of having her role in the affair made public; a couple of the prospective tour members were influential enough to keep it out of the local paper.

"Tell me the truth, my dear," said Winifred some weeks later. "Do you think she *was* a complete fraud?"

"Is there any doubt?"

"But she was a truly extraordinary woman. That voice! I can still hear it. She was a marvelous speaker."

"Performer, don't you mean?"

"Whatever. But she made it all so *real*. All those places she'd been to, you could almost feel you were there."

I knew all too well what she meant, for eventually I did make that trip to Sweden, and yet, strange to say, from the moment I left the plane at Stockholm's Arlanda Airport nothing of what I saw, despite my determination to be enchanted by everything,

quite measured up to the dream. The countryside in summer was lovely; Varberg, the town from which my grandfather had emigrated, was not without interest. Stockholm, despite a plumbing disaster in my hotel room, offered sights and sounds that could not fail to please. The drive south through the chateau country of Skane had a picture-book quality, and of course the cuisine throughout the trip was matchless.

But I must be honest. Serenity Wilkes, with her sparkle and verve and that magic flute of a voice, had led me to expect more. Or was it simply that Maugham had been right, that the wise traveler is indeed the one who travels only in imagination.

The story, however, does not end there. One autumn five years after Serenity Wilkes had absconded I was visiting a cousin in California who had bought a small house in Santa Monica. One morning I boarded the little trolley that ran along the shore from Santa Monica Beach down to Venice. As I neared the end of the line I happened to catch sight of a man slumped in a deck chair on the glistening white beach. He was wearing a cap and facing the ocean, but there was something about the set of his shoulders and the two canes propped against his chair that brought Mr. Clayburn to mind. It couldn't have been he, of course, or so I thought until the woman in the chair beside him turned to face him. I recognized her instantly: It was Serenity Wilkes!

By the time I'd jumped off the trolley and walked back up the beach the woman's chair was empty but Clayburn was still there. He reacted to my appearance with an expression of dismay quite beyond my powers to describe. Yet I must give him credit. He was quick to disguise his consternation.

"My dear fellow!" he cried, reaching for one of his canes as if meaning to rise but not actually making the effort. "It is indeed a small world."

"How are you, Clayburn?" I replied equably, dropping into the chair beside him.

"Oh, much the same, yes, much the same."

Which wasn't quite the truth. He looked younger, heartier, less frail than I remembered, and deeply tanned. With a furtive glance over his shoulder, he asked what had brought me to that end of the continent. I told him about my cousin and added, casually: "Ever hear anything more of Serenity Wilkes?"

His answer took me by surprise. "Oh, hadn't you heard? Died,

poor lady. I can't recall who told me. Killed in a train accident, or was it a car crash, somewhere in Spain. Two or three years ago."

I could not restrain my laughter. "Was she indeed? Then who was the woman occupying this chair not fifteen minutes ago? Her twin sister?"

"Ah, you saw her," he said, looking no more abashed than one might expect from a practiced liar.

"Yes. With your heads together. Planning another tour, were you?"

"No, no," he replied, as if the question were serious. "We've retired. Bought a little place in town. Tillie liked the idea of living in Venice—even if it's the wrong one."

"Tillie?"

Clayburn noted my dismay with a sly chuckle. "Tillie Slovenska was her name before we were married. Tullah Solenivaskaya and Serenity Wilkes were a couple of the monikers she invented—for business purposes, you know. Like the accent. Tillie's good at languages. Yes, of all the cities she never visited, Venice was her favorite."

"Never visited?"

"My dear fellow, Tillie's never been out of the country. We always planned to travel. She's always had a passion for faraway places. Learned more about the world from books than she'd ever have learned by actually seeing it. A travel expert who never left home, you might say." He tapped one of his canes. "We might have traveled if some drunken idiot hadn't run me down in his pickup truck. Legs healed but the old spine was irreparably damaged. We got around the U.S.A. but that's all we could manage."

Oblivious of my astonishment, he told me the truth with a disarming candor. He seemed quite proud of his wife's resourcefulness, how she had turned to account her powers of imagination and her knowledge of Europe to create a mythical travel service appealing particularly to communities with strong ethnic populations. The Swedes of Fair Grove had been ripe for plucking. Her collection of native costumes had been sewn by her own hand from pictures found in books.

"Oh, sure it was a scam," Clayburn admitted seemingly without shame. "But nobody lost more than they could afford."

"I did. My friend Winifred did."

"Ah, sorry about that."

"So you were her confederate. You were there to vouch for her

credentials. And to remain behind when it all came to light. To douse the flames of anger, so to speak. To counsel patience."

"You'd be surprised how rarely people want to publicize their gullibility."

Stunned by all this, I looked away down the beach to where young men with muscular brown bodies shining in the blaze of the sun were doing handsprings and lifting barbells.

Clayburn reached out and placed a bony hand lightly on my arm. "So what are you going to do? Call the cops?"

"What else would you expect me to do?"

"We might be able to make good your loss."

"What about all the others?"

"Ah well, I'm afraid our assets wouldn't stretch that far."

"Then you leave me no choice."

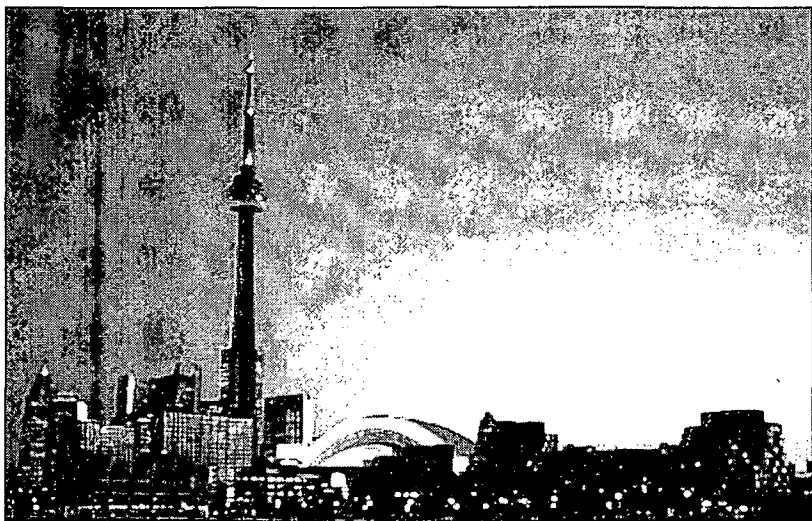
Before he could reply I sprang up and strode away from the beach, not bothering to look back. I glanced at my watch. I'd promised to call my cousin and tell her if I'd be back for lunch. But I knew it might be unwise to delay calling the police. I stopped at the first public phone and looked up the number.

And then I hesitated. I thought of that evening in the Viking Lodge. I could almost hear that birdlike sing-song voice stirring my imagination with word pictures of a Sweden that still remained a more vivid memory than the reality I'd finally experienced.

I dug a coin from my pocket and lifted the receiver. Once more I paused. Behind me I could hear the noise of the surf and a distant caroling of laughter, and I knew if I turned around I would see two empty chairs on the beach. Even a five-minute delay in calling the police might lead to Vanishing Act Part Two. Yet still I hesitated. Should I call my cousin or call the police? Police or cousin? Cousin or police?

What would you have done?

Hardly conscious of making a decision, I pressed the phone to my ear and dialed. ●



THE WRONG HANDS

by Peter Robinson

“I

s everything in order?” the old man asked, his scrawny fingers clutching the comforter like talons.

“Seems to be,” said Mitch.

Drawing up the will had been a simple enough task. Mr. Garibaldi and his wife had the dubious distinction of outliving both their children, and there wasn’t much to leave.

“Would you like to sign it now?” he asked, holding out his Mont Blanc.

The old man clutched the pen the way a child holds a crayon and scribbled his illegible signature on the documents.

“There . . . that’s done,” said Mitch. And he placed the papers in his briefcase.

Mr. Garibaldi nodded. The movement brought on a spasm and such a coughing fit that Mitch thought the old man was going to die right there and then.

But he recovered. "Will you do me a favour?" he croaked when he'd got his breath back.

Mitch frowned. "If I can."

With one bent, shrivelled finger, Mr. Garibaldi pointed to the floor under the window. "Pull the carpet back," he said.

Mitch stood up and looked.

"Please," said Mr. Garibaldi. "The carpet."

Mitch walked over to the window and rolled back the carpet. Underneath was nothing but floorboards.

"One of the boards is loose," said the old man. "The one directly in line with the wall socket. Lift it up."

Mitch felt and, sure enough, part of the floorboard was loose. He lifted it easily with his fingernails. Underneath, wedged between the joists, lay a package wrapped in old newspaper.

"That's it," said the old man. "Take it out."

Mitch did. It was heavier than he had expected.

"Now put the board back and replace the carpet."

After he had done as he was asked, Mitch carried the package over to the bed.

"Open it," said Mr. Garibaldi. "Go on, it won't bite you."

Slowly, Mitch unwrapped the newspaper. It was from December 18, 1947, he noticed, and the headline reported a blizzard dumping twenty-eight inches of snow on New York City the day before. Inside, he found a layer of oilcloth wrapped around the object. When he had folded back that too, the gun gleamed up at him. It was old, he could tell that, but it looked in superb condition. He hefted it into his hand, felt its weight and balance, pointed it towards the wall as if to shoot.

"Be careful," said the old man. "It's loaded."

Mitch looked at the gun again, then put it back on the oilcloth. His fingers were smudged with oil or grease, so he took a tissue from the bedside table and wiped them off as best he could.

"What the hell are you doing with a loaded gun?" he asked.

Favorably compared to Ruth Rendell and P. D. James for the rich characterizations in his novels, Peter Robinson came to write crime fiction through his enjoyment of the genre as a reader and fan. While many of his novels are set in England, where he grew up, most of his short stories, including this one, take place in his adopted country, Canada. †

Mr. Garibaldi sighed. "It's a Luger," he said. "First World War, probably. Old, anyway. A friend gave it to me many years ago. A German friend. I've kept it ever since. Partly as a memento of him and partly for protection. You know what this city's been getting like these past few years. I've maintained it, cleaned it, kept it loaded. Now I'm gonna die I want to hand it in. I don't want it to fall into the wrong hands."

Mitch set the Luger down on the bed. "Why tell me?" he asked.

"Because it's unregistered and I'd like you to hand it over for me." He shook his head and coughed again. "I haven't got long left. I don't want no cops coming round here and giving me a hard time."

"They won't give you a hard time." More like give you a medal for handing over an unregistered firearm, Mitch thought.

"Maybe not. But . . ." Mr. Garibaldi grabbed Mitch's wrist with his talon. The fingers felt cold and dry, like a reptile's skin. Mitch tried to pull back a little, but the old man held on, pulled him closer, and croaked, "Sophie doesn't know. It would make her real angry to know we had a gun in the house the last fifty years and I kept it from her. I don't want to end my days with my wife mad at me. Please, Mr. Mitchell. It's a small favour I ask."

Mitch scratched the side of his eye. True enough, he thought, it *was* a small favour. And it might prove a profitable one, too. Old firearms were worth something to collectors, and Mitch knew a cop who had connections. All he had to say was that he had been entrusted this gun by a client, who had brought it to his office, that he had put it in the safe and called the police immediately. What could be wrong with that?

"Okay," he said, rewrapping the gun and slipping it in his briefcase along with the will. "I'll do as you ask. Don't worry. You rest now. Everything will be okay."

Mr. Garibaldi smiled and seemed to sink into a deep sleep.

Mitch stood on the porch of the Garibaldi house and pulled on his sheepskin-lined gloves, glad to be out of the cloying atmosphere of the sickroom, even if it was minus ninety or something outside.

He was already wearing his heaviest overcoat over a suit and a wool scarf, but still he was freezing. It was one of those clear winter nights when the ice splinters underfoot and the breeze off the lake seems to numb you right to the bone. Reflected street lamps splintered in the broken mirror of the sidewalk, the colour

of Mr. Garibaldi's jaundiced eyes.

Mitch pulled his coat tighter around his scarf and set off, cracking the iced-over puddles as he went. Here and there, the remains of last week's snow had frozen into ruts, and he almost slipped and fell a couple of times on the uneven surface.

As he walked, he thought of old Garibaldi, with no more than a few days left to live. The old man must have been in pain sometimes, but he never complained. And he surely must have been afraid of death? Maybe dying put things in perspective, Mitch thought. Maybe the mind, facing the eternal, icy darkness of death, had ways of dealing with its impending extinction, of discarding the dross, the petty and the useless.

Or perhaps not. Maybe the old man just lay there day after day running baseball statistics through his mind; or wishing he'd gone to bed with his neighbour's wife when he had the chance.

As Mitch walked up the short hill he cursed the fact that you could never get a decent parking spot in these residential streets. He'd had to park in the lot behind the drugstore, the next street over, and the quickest way there was through a dirt alley just about wide enough for a garbage truck to pass through.

It happened as he cut through the alley. And it happened so fast that, afterwards, he couldn't be quite sure whether he felt the sharp blow to the back of his head before his feet slipped out from under him, or after.

When Mitch opened his eyes again, the first thing he saw was the night sky. It looked like a black satin bedsheet with some rich woman's diamonds spilled all over it. There was no moon.

He felt frozen to the marrow. He didn't know how long he had been lying there in the alley—long enough to die of exposure, it felt like—but when he checked his watch, he saw he had only been out a little over five minutes. Not surprising no one had found him yet. Not here, on a night like this.

He lay on the frozen mud and took stock. Despite the cold, everything hurt—his elbow, which he had cracked trying to break his fall; his tailbone; his right shoulder; and, most of all, his head—and the pain was sharp and spiky, not at all numb like the rest of him. He reached around and touched the sore spot on the back of his head. His fingers came away sticky with blood.

He took a deep breath and tried to get to his feet, but he could only manage to slip and skitter around like a newborn lamb,

making himself even more dizzy. There was no purchase, nothing to grip. Snail-like, he slid himself along the ice towards the rickety fence. There, by reaching out and grabbing the wooden rails carefully, he was able to drag himself to his feet.

At first, he wished he hadn't. His head started to spin and he thought it was going to split open with pain. For a moment, he was sure he was going to fall again. He held on to the fence for dear life and vomited, the world swimming around his head. After that, he felt a little better. Maybe he wasn't going to die.

The only light shone from a street lamp at the end of the alley, not really enough to search by, so Mitch used the plastic penlight attached to his key ring to look for his briefcase. But it wasn't there. Stepping carefully on the ribbed ice, still in pain and unsure of his balance, Mitch extended the area of his search in case the briefcase had skidded off somewhere on the ice when he fell. It was nowhere to be found.

Almost as an afterthought, as the horrible truth was beginning to dawn on him, he felt for his wallet. Gone. So he'd been mugged. The blow had come *before* the fall. And they'd taken his briefcase.

Then Mitch remembered the gun.

The next morning was a nightmare. Mitch had managed to get himself home from the alley without crashing the car, and after a long, hot bath, a glass of scotch, and four extra-strength Tylenol, he began to feel a little better. He seemed to remember his mother once saying you shouldn't go to sleep after a bump on the head—he didn't know why—but it didn't stop him that night.

In the morning he awoke aching all over.

When he had showered, taken more Tylenol, and forced himself to eat some bran flakes, he poured a second cup of strong black coffee and sat down to think things out. None of his thoughts brought any comfort.

He hadn't gone to the cops. How could he, given what he had been carrying? Whichever way you looked at it, he had been in possession of an illegal, unregistered firearm when he was mugged. Even if the cops had been lenient, there was the Law Society to reckon with, and like most lawyers, Mitch feared the Law Society far more than he feared the cops.

Maybe he could have sort of skipped over the gun in his account of the mugging. After all, he was pretty sure that it couldn't be traced either to him or to Garibaldi. But what if the cops found

the briefcase, and the gun was still inside it? How could he explain that?

Would that be worse than if the briefcase turned up and the gun was gone? If the muggers took it, then chances were someone might get shot with it. Either way, it was a bad scenario for Mitch, and it was all his fault. Well, maybe *fault* was too strong a word—he couldn't help getting mugged—but he still felt somehow responsible.

All he could do was hope that whoever took the gun would get rid of it, throw it in the lake, before anyone came to any harm.

Some hope.

Later that morning, Mitch remembered Garibaldi's will. That had gone, too, along with the briefcase and the gun. And it would have to be replaced.

There's only one true will—copies have no legal standing—and if you lose it you could have a hell of a mess on your hands. Luckily, he had Garibaldi's will on his computer. All he had to do was print it out again and hope to hell the old guy hadn't died during the night.

He hadn't. Puzzled, but accepting Mitch's excuse of a minor error he'd come across when proofreading the document, Garibaldi signed again with a shaking hand.

"Is the gun safe?" he asked afterwards. "You've got it locked away in your safe?"

"Yes," Mitch lied. "Yes, don't worry, the gun's perfectly safe."

Every day Mitch scanned the paper from cover to cover for news of a shooting or a gun found abandoned somewhere. He even took to buying the *Sun*, which he normally wouldn't even use to light a fire at the cottage, because it covered far more local crime than the *Globe and Mail* or the *Toronto Star*. Anything to do with a gun was sure to make it into the *Sun*.

But it wasn't until three weeks and three days after the mugging—and two weeks after Mr. Garibaldi's death "peacefully, at home"—that the item appeared. And it was big enough news to make the *Globe and Mail*.

Mr. Charles McVie was shot dead in his home last night during the course of an apparent burglary. A police spokesperson says Mr. McVie was shot twice, once in the

chest and once in the groin, while interrupting a burglar at his Beaches mansion shortly after midnight last night. He died of his wounds three hours later at Toronto East General Hospital. Detective Greg Hollins, who has been assigned the case, declined to comment on whether the police are following any significant leads at the moment, but he did inform our reporter that preliminary tests indicate the bullet was most likely fired from an old 9mm semiautomatic weapon, such as a Luger, unusual and fairly rare these days. As yet, police have not been able to locate the gun. Mr. McVie, 62, made his fortune in the construction business. His wife, Laura, who was staying overnight with friends in Windsor when the shooting occurred, had no comment when she was reached early this morning.

The newspaper shook in Mitch's hands. It had happened. Somebody had died because of him. But while he felt guilt, he also felt fear. Was there really no way the police could tie the gun to him or Mr. Garibaldi? Thank God the old man was dead, or he might hear about the shooting and his conscience might oblige him to come forward. Luckily, his widow, Sophie, knew nothing.

With luck, the old Luger was in the deepest part of the lake for sure by now. Whether anyone else had touched it or not, Mitch knew damn well that he had, and that his greasy fingerprints weren't only all over the handle and the barrel, but they were on the wrapping paper, too. The muggers had probably been wearing gloves when they robbed him—it was a cold night—and maybe they'd had the sense to keep them on when they saw what was in the briefcase.

Calm down, he told himself. Even if the cops did find his fingerprints on the gun, they had no way of knowing whose they were. He had never been fingerprinted in his life, and the cops would have no reason to subject him to it now.

They couldn't connect Charles McVie to either Mr. Garibaldi or to Mitch.

Except for one thing.

Mitch had done McVie's will two years ago, after his marriage to Laura, his second wife.

Mitch had known that Laura McVie was younger than her husband, but even that knowledge hadn't prepared him for the

woman who opened the door to him three days after Charles McVie's funeral.

Black became her. Really became her, the way it set off her creamy complexion, long blond hair, Kim Basinger lips, and eyes the colour of a bluejay's wing.

"Yes?" she said, frowning slightly.

Mitch had put on his very best, most expensive suit, and he knew he looked sharp. He didn't want her to think he was some ambulance chaser come after her husband's money.

As executor, Laura McVie was under no obligation to use the same lawyer who had prepared her husband's will to handle his estate. Laura might have a lawyer of her own in mind. But Mitch *did* have the will, so there was every chance that if he presented himself well she would choose him to handle the estate too.

And there was much more money in estates—especially those as big as McVie's—than there was in wills.

At least, Mitch thought, he wasn't so hypocritical as to deny that he had mixed motives for visiting the widow. Didn't everyone have mixed motives? He felt partly responsible for McVie's death, of course, and a part of him genuinely wanted to offer the widow help.

After Mitch had introduced himself, Laura looked him over, plump lower lip fetchingly nipped between two sharp white teeth, then she flashed him a smile and said, "Please come in, Mr. Mitchell. I was wondering what to do about all that stuff. I really could use some help." Her voice was husky and low-pitched, with just a subtle hint of that submissive tone that can drive certain men wild.

Mitch followed her into the high-ceilinged hallway, watching the way her hips swayed under the mourning dress.

He was in. All right! He almost executed a little jig on the parquet floor.

The house was an enormous heap of stone overlooking the ravine. It had always reminded Mitch of an English vicarage, or what he assumed an English vicarage looked like from watching PBS. Inside, though, it was bright and spacious and filled with modern furniture—not an antimacassar in sight. The paintings that hung on the white walls were all contemporary abstracts and geometric designs, no doubt originals and worth a small fortune in them-

selves. The stereo equipment was state of the art, as were the large-screen TV, VCR, and laser-disc player.

Laura McVie sat on a white sofa and crossed her legs. The dress she wore was rather short for mourning, Mitch thought, though he wasn't likely to complain about the four or five inches of smooth thigh it revealed. Especially as the lower part was sheathed in black silk stockings and the upper was bare and white.

She took a cigarette from a carved wooden box on the coffee table and lit it with a lighter that looked like a baseball. Mitch declined the offer to join her.

"I hope you don't mind," she said, lowering her eyes. "It's my only vice."

"Of course not." Mitch cleared his throat. "I just wanted to come and tell you how sorry I was to hear about the . . . the tragic accident. Your husband was—"

"It wasn't an accident, Mr. Mitchell," she said calmly. "My husband was murdered. I believe we should face the truth clearly and not hide behind euphemisms, don't you?"

"Well, if you put it like that . . ."

She nodded. "You were saying about my husband?"

"Well, I didn't know him well, but I *have* done some legal work for him—specifically his will—and I am aware of his circumstances."

"My husband was very rich, Mr. Mitchell."

"Exactly. I thought . . . well . . . there are some unscrupulous people out there, Mrs. McVie."

"Please, call me Laura."

"Laura. There are some unscrupulous people out there, and I thought if there was anything I could do to help, perhaps give advice, take the burden off your hands . . . ?"

"What burden would that be, Mr. Mitchell?"

Mitch sat forward and clasped his hands on his knees. "When someone dies, Mrs.—Laura—there are always problems, legal wrangling and the like. Your husband's affairs seem to be in good order, judging from his will, but that was made two years ago. I'd hate to see someone come and take advantage of you."

"Thank you," Laura said. "You're so sweet. And why shouldn't you handle the estate? Someone has to do it. I can't."

Mitch had the strangest feeling that something was going awry here. Laura McVie didn't seem at all the person to be taken advantage of, yet she seemed to be swallowing his line of patter.

That could only be, he decided, because it suited her, too. And why not? It would take a load off her mind.

"That wasn't the main reason I came, though," Mitch pressed on, feeling an irrational desire to explain himself. "I genuinely wanted to see if I could help in any way."

"Why?" she asked, blue eyes open wide. "Why should you? Mr. Mitchell, I've come to learn that people do things for selfish motives. Self-interest rules. Always. I don't believe in altruism. Nor did my husband. At least we were agreed on that." She turned aside, flicked some ash at the ashtray, and missed. In contrast to everything else in the place, the tin ashtray looked as if it had been stolen from a lowlife bar. "So you want to help me?" she said. "For a fee, of course."

Mitch felt embarrassed and uncomfortable. The part of him that had desperately wanted to make amends for his part in Charles McVie's death was being thwarted by the frankness and openness of the widow. Yes, he could use the money—of course he could—but that really *wasn't* his only reason for being there, and he wanted her to know that. How could he explain that he really *wasn't* such a bad guy?

"There are expenses involved in settling an estate," Mitch went on. "Of course there are. But I'm not here to cheat you."

She smiled at him indulgently. "Of course not."

Which definitely came across as, "*As if you could.*"

"But if you'll allow me to—"

She shifted her legs, showing more thigh. "Mr. Mitchell," she said. "I'm getting the feeling that you really do have another reason for coming to see me. If it's not that you're after my husband's money, then what are you after?"

Mitch swallowed. "I . . . I feel . . . You see, I—"

"Come on, Mr. Mitchell. You can tell me. You'll feel better."

The voice that had seemed so submissive when Mitch first heard it now became hypnotic, so warm, so trustworthy, so easy to answer. And he had to tell someone.

"I feel partly responsible for your husband's death," he said, looking into her eyes. "Oh, I'm not the burglar, I'm not the killer. But I think I inadvertently supplied the gun."

Laura McVie looked puzzled. Now he had begun, Mitch saw no point in stopping. If he could only tell this woman the full story, he thought, then she would understand. Perhaps she would even be sympathetic towards him. So he told her.

When he had finished, Laura stood up abruptly and walked over to the picture window with its view of a back garden as big as High Park. Mitch sat where he was and looked at her from behind. Her legs were close together and her arms were crossed. She seemed to be turned in on herself. He couldn't tell whether she was crying or not, but her shoulders seemed to be moving.

"Well?" he asked, after a while. "What do you think?"

She let the silence stretch a moment, then dropped her arms and turned around slowly. Her eyes did look moist with tears. "What do I think?" she said. "I don't know. I don't know what to think. I think that maybe if you'd reported the gun stolen, the police would have searched for it and my husband wouldn't have been murdered."

"But I would have been charged, disbarred."

"Mr. Mitchell, surely that's a small price to pay for someone's life? I'm sorry. I think you'd better go. I can't think straight right now."

"But I—"

"Please, Mr. Mitchell. Leave." She turned back to the window again and folded her arms, shaking.

Mitch got up off the sofa and headed for the door. He felt defeated, as if he had left something important unfinished, but there was nothing he could do about it. Only slink off with his tail between his legs feeling worse than when he had come. Why hadn't he just told her he was after handling McVie's estate. Money, pure and simple. Self-interest like that she would have understood.

Two days later, and still no developments reported in the McVie investigation, Laura phoned.

"Mr. Mitchell?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry about my behaviour the other day. I was upset, as you can imagine."

"I can understand that," Mitch said. "I don't blame you. I don't even know why I told you."

"I'm glad you did. I've had time to think about it since then, and I'm beginning to realize how terrible you must feel. I want you to realize that I don't blame you. It's not the gun that commits the crime, after all, is it? It's the person who pulls the trigger. I'm sure if the burglar hadn't got that one, he'd have got one somewhere

else. Look, this is very awkward over the telephone; do you think you could come to the house?"

"When?"

"How about this evening. For dinner?"

"Fine," said Mitch. "I'm really glad you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

"Eight o'clock?"

"Eight it is."

When he put down the phone, Mitch jumped to his feet, punched the air, shouted, "Yes!"

"Dinner" was catered by a local Italian restaurant, Laura McVie not being, in her own words, "much of a cook." Two waiters delivered the food, served it discreetly, and took away the dirty dishes.

Mostly, Mitch and Laura made small talk in the candlelight over the pasta and wine, and it wasn't until the waiters had left and they were alone, relaxing on the sofa, each cradling a snifter of Courvoisier XO cognac, with mellow jazz playing in the background, that the conversation became more intimate.

Laura was still funereally clad, but tonight her dress, made of semi-transparent layers of black chiffon—more than enough for decency—fell well below knee-height. There was still no disguising the curves, and the rustling sounds as she crossed her legs made Mitch more than a little hot under the collar.

Laura puckered her lips to light a cigarette. When she had blown the smoke out, she asked, "Are you married?"

Mitch shook his head.

"Ever been?"

"Nope."

"Just didn't meet the right girl, is that it?"

"Something like that."

"You're not gay, are you?"

He laughed. "What on earth made you think that?"

She rested her free hand on his and smiled. "Don't worry. Nothing made me think it. Nothing in particular. Just checking, that's all."

"No," Mitch said. "I'm not gay."

"More cognac?"

"Sure." Mitch was already feeling a little tipsy, but he didn't want to spoil the mood.

She fetched the bottle and poured them each a generous mea-

sure. "I didn't really *love* Charles, you know," she said when she had settled down and smoothed her dress again. "I mean, I respected him, I even liked him, I just didn't love him."

"Why did you marry him?"

Laura shrugged. "I don't know, really. He asked me. He was rich and seemed to live an exciting life. Travel. Parties. I got to meet all kinds of celebrities. We'd only been married two years, you know. And we'd only known one another a few weeks before we got married. We hadn't even . . . you know. Anyway, I'm sorry he's dead . . . in a way."

"What do you mean?"

Laura leaned forward and stubbed out her cigarette. Then she brushed back a long blond tress and took another sip of cognac before answering. "Well," she said, "now that he's dead, it's all mine, isn't it? I'd be a hypocrite and a fool if I said that didn't appeal to me. All this wealth and no strings attached. No responsibilities."

"What responsibilities were there before?"

"Oh, you know. The usual wifely kind. Charles was never, well . . . let's say he wasn't a very passionate lover. He wanted me more as a showpiece than anything else. Something to hang on his arm that looked good. Don't get me wrong, I didn't mind. It was a small price to pay. And then we were forever having to entertain the most boring people. Business acquaintances. You know the sort of thing. Well, now that Charles is gone, I won't have to do that anymore, will I? I'll be able to do what I want. Exactly what I want."

Almost without Mitch knowing it, Laura had edged nearer towards him as she was speaking, and now she was so close he could smell the warm, acrid smoke on her breath. He found it curiously intoxicating. Soon she was close enough to kiss.

She took hold of his hand and rested it on her breast. "It's been a week since the funeral," she said. "Don't you think it's time I took off my widow's weeds?"

When Mitch left Laura McVie's house the following morning, he was beginning to think he might be onto a good thing. Why stop at being estate executor? he asked himself. He already knew that, under the terms of the will, Laura got everything—McVie had no children or other living relatives—and *everything* was somewhere in the region of five million dollars.

Even if he didn't love her—and how could you tell if you loved someone after just one night?—he certainly felt passionately drawn to her. They got on well together, thought alike, and she was a wonderful lover. Mitch was no slouch, either. He could certainly make up for her late husband in that department.

He mustn't rush it, though. Take things easy, see what develops. . . . Maybe they could go away together for a while. Somewhere warm. And then . . . well . . . five million dollars.

Such were his thoughts as he turned the corner, just before the heavy hand settled on his shoulder and a deep voice whispered in his ear, "Detective Greg Hollins, Mr. Mitchell. Homicide. I think it's about time you and I had a long talk."

Relieved to be let off with little more than a warning for cooperating with the police, Mitch turned up at Laura's the next evening as arranged. This time, they skipped the dinner and drinks preliminaries and headed straight for her bedroom.

Afterwards, she lay with her head resting on his shoulder, smoking a cigarette.

"My God," she said. "I missed this when I was married to Charles."

"Didn't you have any lovers?" Mitch asked.

"Of course I didn't."

"Oh, come on. I won't be jealous. I promise. Tell me."

She jerked away, stubbed out the cigarette on the bedside ashtray, and said, "You're just like the police. Do you know that? You've got a filthy mind."

"Hey," said Mitch. "It's me. Mitch. Okay?"

"Still . . . They think I did it, you know."

"Did what?"

"Killed Charles."

"I thought you had an alibi."

"I do, idiot. They think the burglary was just a cover. They think I hired someone to kill him."

"Did you?"

"See what I mean? Just like the cops, with your filthy, suspicious mind."

"What makes you think they suspect you?"

"The way they talked, the way they questioned me. I think they're watching me."

"You're just being paranoid, Laura. You're upset. They always

suspect someone in the family at first. It's routine. Most killings are family affairs. You'll see, pretty soon they'll drop it."

"Do you really think so?"

"Sure I do. Just you wait and see."

And moments later they were making love again.

Laura seemed a little distracted when she let him in the next night. At first, he thought she had something on the stove, but then he remembered she didn't cook.

She was on the telephone, as it turned out. And she hung up the receiver just as he walked into the living room.

"Who was that?" he asked. "Not reporters, I hope?"

"No," she said, arms crossed, facing him, an unreadable expression on her face.

"Who, then?"

Laura just stood there. "They've found the gun," she said finally.

"They've what? Where?"

"In your garage, under an old tarpaulin."

"I don't understand. What are you talking about? When?"

She looked at her watch. "About now."

"How?"

Laura shrugged. "Anonymous tip. You'd better sit down, Mitch."

Mitch collapsed on the sofa.

"Drink?"

"A large one."

Laura brought him a large tumbler of scotch and sat in the armchair opposite him.

"What's all this about?" he asked, after the whiskey had warmed his insides. "I don't understand what you're saying. How could they find the gun in my garage? I told you what happened to it."

"I know you did," said Laura. "And I'm telling you where it ended up. You're really not that bright, are you, Mitch? How do you think it got there?"

"Someone must have put it there."

"Right."

"One of the muggers? But . . . ?"

"What does it matter? What matters is that it will probably have your fingerprints on it. Or the wrapping will. All those greasy smudges. And even if it doesn't, how are you going to explain its presence in your garage?"

"But why would the cops think I killed Charles?"

"We had a relationship. We were lovers. Like I told you, I'm certain they've been watching me, and they can't fail to have noticed that you've stayed overnight on more than one occasion."

"But that's absurd. I hadn't even met you before your husband's death."

"Hadn't you?" She raised her eyebrows. "Don't you remember, honey, all those times we met in secret, made love cramped in the back of your car because we didn't even dare be seen signing in under false names in the Have-a-Nap Motel or wherever? We had to keep our relationship very, very secret. Don't you remember?"

"You'd tell them that?"

"The way they'll see it is that the relationship was more important to you than to me. You became obsessed by jealousy because I was married to someone else. You couldn't stand it anymore. And you thought by killing my husband you could get both me and my money. After all, you did prepare his will, didn't you? You knew all about his finances."

Mitch shook his head.

"I *would* like to thank you, though," Laura went on. "Without you, we had a good plan—a very good one—but *with* you we've got a perfect one."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you were right when you suggested I had a lover. I do. Oh, not you, not the one I'm handing over to the police, the one who became so obsessed with me that it unhinged him and he murdered my husband. No. I've been very careful with Jake. I met him on the Yucatán Peninsula when Charles and I were on holiday there six months ago and Charles went down with Montezuma's revenge. I know it sounds like a cliché, but it was love at first sight. We hatched the plan very quickly and we knew we had to keep our relationship a total secret. Nobody must suspect a thing. So we never met after that vacation. There were no letters or postcards. The only contact we had was through public telephones."

"And what happens now?"

"After a decent interval—after you've been tried and convicted of my husband's murder—Jake and I will meet and eventually get married. We'll sell up here, of course, and live abroad. Live in luxury. Oh, please don't look so crestfallen, Mitch. Believe me, I *am* sorry. I didn't know you were going to walk into my life with that irresistible little confession, now, did I? I figured I'd just ride it out, the cops' suspicions and all. I mean, they might suspect me,

but they couldn't prove anything. I *was* in Windsor staying with an old university friend. They've checked. And now they've got you in the bargain. . . ." She shrugged. "Why would they bother with little old me? I just couldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. You'll make a wonderful fall guy. But because I like you, Mitch, I'm at least giving you a little advance warning, aren't I? The police will be looking for you, but you've still got time to make a break, leave town."

"What if I go to them, tell them everything you've told me?"

"They'll think you're crazy. Which you are. Obsession does that to people. Makes them crazy."

Mitch licked his lips. "Look, I'd have to leave everything behind. I don't even have any cash on me. Laura, you don't think you could—"

She shook her head. "Sorry, honey. No can do. Nothing personal."

Mitch slumped back in the chair. "At least tell me one more thing. The gun. I still don't understand how it came to be the one that killed your husband."

She laughed, showing the sharp white teeth. "Pure coincidence. It was beautiful. Jake happens to be . . .

" . . . a burglar by profession, and a very good one. He has worked all over the States and Canada, and he's never been caught. We thought that if I told him about the security system at the house, he could get around it cleverly and . . . Of course, he couldn't bring his own gun here from Mexico, not by air, so he had to get one. He said that's not too difficult when you move in the circles he does. The kind of bars where you can buy guns and other stolen goods are much the same anywhere, in much the same sort of neighborhoods. And he's done jobs in Toronto before.

"As luck would have it, he bought an old Luger off two inexperienced muggers. For a hundred bucks. I just couldn't believe it when you came around with your story. There couldn't be two old Lugers kicking around the neighborhood at the same time, could there? I had to turn away from you and hold my sides, I was laughing so much. It made my eyes water. What unbelievable luck!"

"I'm so glad you think so," said Mitch.

"Anyway, when I told Jake, he agreed it was too good an opportunity to miss, so he came back up here, dug the gun up from where he had buried it, safe in its wrapping, and planted it in your garage. He hadn't handled it without gloves on and he

thought the two young punks he bought it from had been too scared to touch it, so the odds were, after you told me your story, that your fingerprints would still be on it. As I said, even if they aren't . . . It's still perfect."

Only tape hiss followed, and Detective Hollins flipped off the machine. "That it?" he asked.

Mitch nodded. "I left. I thought I'd got enough."

"You did a good job. Jesus, you got more than enough. I was hoping she'd let something slip, but I didn't expect a full confession and her accomplice's name in the bargain."

"Thanks. I didn't have a lot of choice, did I?"

The last two times Mitch had been to see Laura, he had been wearing a tiny but powerful voice-activated tape recorder sewn into the lining of his suit jacket. It had lain on the chair beside the bed when they made love, and he had tried to get her to admit she had a boyfriend, as Hollins had suspected. He had also been wearing it the night she told him the police were about to find the Luger in his garage.

The recorder was part of the deal. Why he got off with only a warning for not reporting the theft of an unregistered firearm.

"What'll happen to her now?" he asked Hollins.

"With any luck, both her and her boyfriend will do life," said Hollins. "But what do you care, after the way she treated you? She's a user. She chewed you up and spat you out."

Mitch sighed. "Yeah, I know . . ." he said. "But it could have been worse, couldn't it?"

"How?"

"I could've ended up married to her."

Hollins stared at him for a moment, then he burst out laughing. "I'm glad you've got a sense of humor, Mitchell. You'll need it, what's coming your way next."

Mitch shifted uneasily in his chair. "Hey, just a minute, Hollins. We made a deal. You assured me there'd be no charges over the gun."

Hollins nodded. "That's right. We did make a deal. And I never go back on my word."

Mitch shook his head. "Then I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"Well, there's this woman from the Law Society waiting outside, Mitchell. And she'd *really* like to talk to you." ●

BY DINT OF FREAK WEATHER

by Peter Turnbull

It was hot. Very hot. Abnormally hot. The heat wave seemed to have descended suddenly on Scotland, nay, upon Great Britain, but it seemed that it was the land north of the border that baked more, and had less water, than did the remainder of the island. April, so far as King recalled, had been a normal April in terms of the weather. A month in which the weather was attempting to find its direction: cold, wet, blustery days gave way to hot, dry, still days, then the rain clouds gathered and the winds began to blow again. June, too, had had rainstorms and a powerful thunderstorm which had brought a deluge, flooding King's vegetable garden and widening the leak in the garage roof. June, in turn, had given way to July at a time when people, having first welcomed the heat, began to complain about it. As the month of July matured, the heat wave was officially recognised, news broadcasts covered news of elderly people who had expired because of the temperature and always ended with a warning about the dangers of overexposure to the sun and the effects of the depletion of the ozone layer. The three million

With a dozen novels to his credit, Peter Turnbull has been called "easily the most accomplished writer of the police procedural novel in Britain today" (Ian Bell / *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers*). Mr. Turnbull's best-known procedural series, to which this story belongs, is set in Glasgow, where he lived for many years. His other, newer, police series is set in his native Yorkshire; we'll carry a story from it later in '98. †

people who live in the west of Scotland continued to use water at the normal rate, or greater than normal, so that by the end of July an official drought was announced and the general public were asked to conserve water by taking shallow baths or quick showers, but not washing cars or watering gardens. And the general public did cooperate, it did what it could to preserve the precious, often-taken-for-granted fluid, but grumbled loud and long that if the West of Scotland Water Co., Ltd., had used its vast profits to replace its nineteenth-century infrastructure with late-twentieth-century technology, instead of giving its directors vast handouts which they promptly invested in offshore accounts, then there would not have been a thirty-percent loss of supply because of "seepage" and there wouldn't be a drought in the first place. But the people cooperated, and the flowerbeds began to wilt, the lawns turned to brown, and dirty cars were driven with patriotic pride. The people also visited David's Wynd.

It was because of the drought, and only because of the drought, that people could visit David's Wynd. People travelled from great distances to walk upon a few feet of rough stone pathway. The television companies sent camera crews and the newspapers sent photographers. A farmer allowed a concrete-hard field to be used as a car park and charged a fee of £1.00 per car, "all proceeds to go to the Yorkhill Hospital for Sick Children." So read the hastily painted sign, and just to enforce the sense of good faith, the money wasn't collected, the visitors were invited to drop a one-pound coin into an unsupervised plastic bucket which the farmer had placed at the entrance of the field. The bucket was emptied at the end of each day, and at the end of the three-week period of drought, a cheque for £2,000 was presented, amid great publicity, to the management of the "Sick Kids." Such was the fascination of David's Wynd.

The visitor to David's Wynd would approach the area and find himself in a crocodile of slow-moving vehicles negotiating a narrow country road. He would follow the vehicle in front and find a place in the serried rows of vehicles in the field. He and his party would leave the vehicle, ensuring that at least one window was wound down, and step into the sun and feel the actual discernible weight of the heat pressing down on head and shoulders. Leaving the field by the gate, and dropping a single one-pound coin in the bucket, or perhaps more if charitable, he and his party would follow a line of other trippers down a dirt path, weaving between

people making the return journey, and would become grateful for the shade offered by the foliage, though annoyed by the swarms of flies therein. The path would descend, and then the visitor would emerge from the foliage on the rim of a vast, steeply-sided open area, a baked dry earthen valley gouged in the surface of the land, at the bottom of which was a tantalising glint of water, a small stream a few feet wide. Beyond the stream the dry earthen valley sides rose and met a ribbon of green and above that a blue, cloudless sky in which a yellow blazing thing gave out heat which beat down mercilessly. The visitor, looking to his left, would notice, in the bottom of the valley, the signs of dereliction, of stonework, of a street pattern, faintly visible. He would notice a bridge spanning the narrow stream at the bottom of the valley, on which people walked, gingerly and tentatively. The bridge was the most discernible part of David's Wynd, which had been the main thoroughfare of the village of Prospect. The village of Prospect had been evacuated thirty years earlier and a huge wall built across the bottom of the valley and the valley allowed to flood, being fed by the stream over which David's Wynd bridge had once been built. This, because the citizens of Glasgow needed more water than could be supplied by Loch Katrine. Now, as July edged into August, because of the drought, the bridge of David's Wynd could be walked on again, and the ruins of the Kirk of Prospect, which had clearly collapsed in on itself under the press of water, could be picked over and objects taken away as paperweights, and the old stone hearths in what had once been village cottages could be stared at with wonder. The tripper would come, like hundreds of others, because he knew that the drought would not last and when the rains came, as the rains would, especially in the west of Scotland, then the reservoir would fill and the village of Prospect would once again be flooded, and would remain under two hundred feet of water for perhaps another thirty years, until the next drought. It was a time to grab an opportunity, to do something to tell children about, and maybe in the fullness of time, grandchildren, before they visited for themselves during the next great drought. And if the visitor perhaps averted his gaze from the piles of stone, from the bridge over a grey stream, from the hearths of the cottages, from the opportunist sweeping the ground with his loathsome metal detector, and if he could shield his eyes from the glare of the sun, he might perhaps notice a small group of people further down the valley, closer to the looming concrete wall which

had meant the end for the village of Prospect, people who though clearly preoccupied had no interest at all in the remains of the village. Some of that small group were in plain clothes, others were in uniform, and the visitor would notice a blue and white police tape suspended from four metal poles which had been driven into the ground so that they stood at four corners around a black mound which lay close to the edge of the stream which was all that remained of Prospect Reservoir. The mound was longer than it was broad; it was about five and a half feet long. About.

"Well." Dr. Reynolds stood and turned to King, both men in white shirts and sunglasses. "It is, as you see, a deceased human of the female sex. The plastic sheeting has delayed the degree of decomposition, gives us more to work on, but foul play, definitely foul play, murder most foul. Feet and neck wrapped in lengths of heavy gauge chain, one inch chain, about twenty feet of it. Quite enough to keep the lady at the bottom, but just to belt and bracer it the killer has punctured her stomach, to stop a buildup of gas bloating the corpse and bringing it to the surface. It wouldn't, not with that amount of chain, but whoever did this was intent that she remain in the place where she was put."

"Unlucky or lucky, depending on your point of view," said King, who suffered in the heat and longed for the evening or some shade. "I mean, another fifteen feet and she'd have landed in the river, it's still wide and deep enough to conceal a corpse. Then she would never have been seen. Any idea how long she's been here, sir?"

"None." Reynolds shook his head. "But I think in terms of years, rather than months or weeks. I'll be able to tell you more when I get her back to the G.R.I. I can't do any more here. Do you have a stretcher, please?"

"Stretcher, please." King turned to two constables who had been obediently waiting at the rim of the locus, at the tape. One of the constables bent down and picked up a collapsible stretcher. Reynolds and King stepped back to allow room for the white-faced constables to lift the corpse onto the stretcher. Reynolds surveyed the wide expanse of exposed hillside, denuded of vegetation, following the curve of the valley with its "fingers" leading off. "I mean, it's your job, not mine," he said, "but it occurs to me that if there's one corpse down here, there might be others. God only knows who or what has been dumped in the reservoir over the last

thirty years. Incidentally, I remember the hue and cry when the valley was flooded. I was a schoolboy at the time, clearly remember one old boy refusing to leave his cottage. He was born in it and had to be carried away by the police. Don't know what happened to him. Some old folks' home, I would think."

"Aye." King also glanced about him. "In fact it hadn't occurred to me, but yes, there might be other things of interest to the police, whether or not connected with our lady friend here. I'll get a sweep of both banks organised."

"Any blunt object or knife might be of interest." Beads of sweat poured off Reynolds's brow. His shirt was soaked at the armpits. "I mean, if the murderer dumped her here, he may well have dumped the murder weapon as well."

"I'll ask a team of police frogmen to examine the water at the same time as we sweep the exposed land." King nodded at the good sense of Reynolds's suggestion. "It'll probably be another thirty or so years before we have the chance to do it again."

"Well, I'll leave you at it. Get back to the G.R.I. and start the postmortem. Some start to the working day. Still not ten A.M."

The deceased, once the folds of black heavy-duty plastic sheeting had been removed, together with the silt that had collected in the folds of plastic, revealed itself to be an adult woman who, as Reynolds would note in his report, was in life a slender lady and who was perhaps in her mid forties when she died. Her clothing indicated a lifestyle of comfort. She wore sensible labelled clothing: woollen pullover, cotton blouse, expensive denims, mid-range sports shoes. The degree of dental work and a gold tooth reinforced the impression of a woman who had enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle.

"No noticeable injuries," said Reynolds, "save for the wound to the stomach, but I'm pretty sure that's postmortem and done to allow gas to escape, as I said to DC King. It isn't, at any rate, fatal. In life it would have called for urgent surgical intervention but wouldn't in itself be fatal."

"Indeed, Dr. Reynolds." Millar, the mortuary assistant, eyed the corpse with a gleam in his eye which an onlooker would find sinister.

"So, let's get some facts down." Reynolds spoke for the benefit of the microphone attached to his lapel. He took a tape measure and measured the corpse. "In life," he said, "the deceased would have

been of slight build, about seven stones, and five feet four inches in height. She had shoulder-length auburn hair." Reynolds took a length of stainless-steel metal and placed it in the mouth of the corpse, which was already agape. He levered the length of metal until the rigor cracked and the jaw could be fully opened. "A veritable gold mine of information is the mouth," he said.

"Indeed, Dr. Reynolds." Millar still eyed the corpse with relish.

"Aha . . . yes, a good deal of dental work, as I thought. A second gold tooth at the back of the mouth. Didn't see that immediately . . . Can you pass the pliers, please. . . . Thank you." Reynolds took a firm grip on an upper incisor and twisted and pulled it from the gum and dropped it in the small glass jar held by Millar. "If you'll seal that, I'll do a cross section of it later. It'll give her age to within a year."

Richard King sat at his desk and adjusted the battery-powered fan clipped to the side of his working surface so that the jet of air fell fully on his face. He browsed through the files which he had asked the collator to assemble for him: missing adult females over the last thirty years. He drew up a list in his own hand: name, age, height, hair colour, distinguishing features. . . . He had sixty-seven files, sixty-seven names, sixty-seven partners, sixty-seven sets of relatives, all pining in the agony of not knowing. The thoughts, the beliefs that "she" must be dead, "she" wouldn't have left without a word. If only we had a body to bury so that we could say goodbye to her. Sixty-seven. About two missing adult females each year. Many, many more are reported missing but turn up unharmed, or harmed, or as a corpse: death by accident, death by natural causes, death in suspicious circumstances. But two adult females each year vanish without a trace, go missing and stay missing until, as perhaps in this case, a much decomposed body is discovered by accident or, again as perhaps in this case, thought King, by dint of freak weather conditions. And that is two per year in the Greater Glasgow area alone. His phone rang.

"DC King." He spoke softly, calmly.

"Reynolds here."

"Yes, sir." King gathered his notepad towards him and noted the time: 13:00 hours.

"The corpse in the reservoir. . . ."

"Yes, sir."

"I've completed the P.M. and sent the clothing and the plastic sheeting and the chain and padlocks that held the chain to the ankles and neck off to the forensic-science lab."

"Very good, sir." King held his pen poised.

"The results are inconclusive. I haven't been able to determine the cause of death. I can report that the brain shows some degree of oxygen starvation which might be indicative of strangulation, but the degree of decomposition is such that no bruising to the neck is evident. There is no ligature in place around the neck and the thorax hasn't been crushed, but that doesn't mean that she was not strangled. There's no other antemortem injury that I can detect. A hole has been stabbed in her stomach, but that would not in itself have been fatal. I think that was a postmortem injury to allow body gases to escape and so prevent the corpse from bloating and floating to the surface, as I indicated earlier today. It wouldn't have done so given the weight of the chains but the murderer was making sure. Her clothing is interesting, you'll get more from Jean Kay at the forensic-science lab. She was wearing mid-range clothing, including a sweater, but light shoes. The overall impression was that of a lady dressed for indoors in the winter months, rather than outdoors. A domestic murder one winter's day some years ago, perhaps?"

"Perhaps, indeed." King scribbled in his pad. "Could you assist with the ID?"

"As much as I can, Mr. King, as much as I can. In life, the deceased was five feet four inches in height, slender-built, probably about seven or eight stone, natural auburn hair. I did a cross section of her tooth and the result gave me an age of forty years, plus or minus one year. She had had some dental work done and had two teeth capped with gold, which further indicates a lifestyle of some comfort. I've taken the liberty of amputating the lower jaw and sending it to the school of dentistry so that they can match it against the dental records which are kept centrally, if you can provide them with a possible name."

"I think I'll be able to do that." King glanced at his list. "I've some sixty-plus names here, missing adult females going back to when the valley was flooded to create the reservoir, but that's only local missing females. If she was driven up from England to take the final dive we'll have to access national records. But we'll try locally first."

"Best of luck. I'll leave it with you."

King scanned the list of names, scoring the name off the list as height, age, build, or hair colour mismatched with the deceased, until of the sixty-seven names one leapt off the page: a lady called Jennifer Gregory, right age, size, hair colour. She had been reported missing by her husband twenty years ago. He phoned the name and last known address to the school of dentistry on Sauchiehall Street. Time, he thought, for a late and well-earned lunch.

King strolled out of P Division and into Sauchiehall Street, walking towards the city centre. Having left his sunglasses on his desk, doubting he'd need them in the city, he found that the sun's glare hurt his eyes and he moved onto the right-hand side of the street, which he noted offered marginally more shade. About him people walked slowly in shirt-sleeves, white trousers, cotton skirts and dresses and sunhats. He walked up to the Sauchiehall Street centre and descended to the basement food hall by stairs rather than the escalator and enjoyed the soothing, rippling sound of the fountain and the pool in which people tossed coins for luck and which were collected at intervals and donated to charity. He bought a ham salad at the Salad Bowl and sought a place at the tables. The food hall was bustling, piped music filled the air. It did not surprise King that the outlets vending hot food were doing slow business. He ate leisurely and enjoyed the salad more than he had anticipated. On leaving the food hall he purchased the early edition of the *Evening News*. The story of the body in the reservoir had made the first page, not a banner headline but a small filler on the bottom right. He retraced his steps down Sauchiehall Street towards Charing Cross and the P Division police station. He signed in and checked his pigeonhole for messages. The dental hospital had returned his call. The lower jaw sent that morning by Dr. Reynolds had positively matched with the dental records of Jennifer Gregory, aged forty-one years, of Milngavie.

"She was reported missing by her husband, sir." King leaned forward in the chair while he leafed through the file. Donoghue sat back in his chair, pulling gently on his pipe, listening intently. "Ray Sussock was the interested C. I. D. officer," added King as a by-the-way remark. "He was a detective constable then."

"Must have been one of his first cases." Donoghue took his pipe from his mouth. "I was just graduating."

"I was just starting school."

Donoghue smiled. "Carry on."

"There appeared to be some suspicion at the time, Ray Sussock has recorded it, along the lines of stress and tension in the Gregorys' marriage."

"Oh?" Donoghue rekindled his pipe with a deft flick of his gold-plated lighter.

"Yes. According to their daughter, apparently. She made a statement to Ray which indicated a highly stressed marriage."

"And she disappeared in the middle of that?"

"She did. A good search was made for her but . . ."

"Well, now we know why she wasn't found."

"We certainly do, sir." King glanced up from the file at D.I. Donoghue, who even in the heat hadn't removed his jacket or loosened his tie.

"So what steps do you want to take?"

"Well, sir, I think we ought to reinterview the witness."

"The witness!"

"I mean the daughter."

"Oh . . ." Donoghue glanced at his gold hunter. "Coming up to two P.M. Montgomerie's coming on duty. . . . Take him with you since this has become a murder inquiry. I take it that you don't object to doing a little overtime?"

Richard King thought of his quiet Quakeress wife who dressed in skirts in pastel shades and of his son of very tender years who were both waiting for him at their home in Bishopbriggs and said no, he didn't mind putting in a little overtime.

"You don't have a forwarding address?" Montgomerie asked. He enjoyed watching the young woman's eyes dilate as she absorbed his chiselled features, downturned moustache, thick head of hair, six foot, slim, athletic build.

"Aye . . . it's in the house. I'll get it for you." The young woman walked into the shade of her house, leaving King and Montgomerie on the threshold wondering what good fortune had brought a young woman to be the householder of a prestigious home in well-set Milngavie, previously being the property of the Gregory family. The woman returned a few moments later holding a black leather-bound address book. "See . . . here it is, all mail for Gregory to go to c/o. Steel, 137 White Street, Partick. That's the address we have, but nothing much comes addressed to Gregory these days."

"And you've been here how long, may I ask?"

"Not long, but my husband has been here fifteen years. He's divorced, he's a wee bit older than me. I'm wife number two. He bought the house from Mr. Gregory, he gave us a different forwarding address, then that was changed to c/o Steel, but not much comes for Gregory these days."

"Thanks."

King and Montgomerie drove from the northern suburbs to the brown tenements of the West End, to White Street, Partick G11. Then they ascended the stair of 137, checking the names on the doors as they went. "Steel" was three up left. They pressed the bell and electronic music played "Flower of Scotland." Silence, and then a woman's voice called, "Who is it?"

"Police," King shouted at the door, loudly, but in a nonaggressive manner.

"Police?" the female voice echoed. Then the door was opened.

The owner of the voice was a frail, timid-looking woman in her forties. She had a worn, lined, haggard face and a look of fear in her eyes. "Yes?" she whimpered, but her voice betrayed an educated mind. Her accent was soft, forming the word yes in the roof of her mouth rather than, as most women in Partick would, saying "aye," forming the word at the back of the throat. Both King and Montgomerie saw in the woman an example of the concept of "downward social mobility," so-called.

"We're making enquiries about Jennifer Gregory," King probed while allowing the woman to examine his ID.

The woman sighed. "Jennifer Gregory." She repeated the name with an expression of regret, an air of longing. "I haven't heard that name for a long time. . . . I'm Jennifer Steel, née Gregory, for my sins, for my sins right enough."

To go with the impression of downward social mobility the cops had a second clear impression of a bad marriage, of a wrong choice of partner, of a decision once made not easily reversed and which carries a long way, blights a life . . . of fanciful, wishful thinking of being able to turn the clock back and become Jennifer Gregory again. The woman wore the ache for her maiden name on her sleeve.

Fifteen minutes later the cops sat silently, each in an armchair in the living room of the house of Steel, each silently reading the room while waiting for Jennifer Steel to compose and collect herself. There were posed photographs of soldiers in uniform, of

lampshades made out of shells of mortar bombs, everything was "just so," everything in its place. Even the books on the shelves were arranged so that those with the tallest spines were on the outside of the shelf and the shallow-spined books in the centre, and no book was out of place so as to interrupt the curve. It was a household where the occupants walked on glass: top cat excepted.

"So she was murdered after all?" Jennifer Steel looked at Montgomerie. "I knew she hadn't had an accident or walked off to start a new life. I knew she hadn't abandoned me. She was filled in. I knew, I just knew. . . ."

"Knew?"

"That she'd been murdered. See, Mum, she would have walked out on him, on Dad, but she'd not leave me. Even though I was a woman then, I was twenty when she disappeared, when my dad told me he'd reported her missing. I remember it so well, as you would, he was so, so matter-of-fact about it, no worry, no concern. He just said it as though he'd come in from the garden and said, 'I've planted some peas in the spare ground,' except he came in and said, 'I've reported her missing.' We had a house with a garden. I miss a garden, I can't take to tenement living, but he likes it." She nodded to a photograph of soldiers. "That's him on the end of the second row. He grew up in tenements, won't live anywhere else. He always gets what he wants. He's on manoeuvres right now in Germany, he goes for two weeks a year. He's in the Territorial Army, a corporal in the catering corps. Honest, the way he swaggers you'd think he was an officer in some fancy cavalry regiment. Inspecting this house, throwing a tantrum if anything's out of place or not clean. See the books on the shelves, that's the mentality of wee Tam Steel. I even have to butter the bread by spreading the butter at a forty-five-degree angle and right to each corner. And when he's not in Germany or away at the weekends playing soldiers, he's nothing, a round-the-house nobody, out of work. Says he can't get a job. Won't try, more like it, but that doesn't bother him because each weekend and each summer in Germany he's somebody in the catering corps. I don't know why I stay. No children, he wouldn't have them. Spoil the routine of the house, he said . . . but it's not so easy to leave. He's not violent, not with his hands, but I don't feel I exist sometimes. Anyway, this isn't about me." She forced a courageous smile. "It's about Mum, Jennifer Gregory senior."

"Do you know who'd want to murder your mother?"

"Only my father. If she was murdered, he did it. He led her a dog's life. I mean, he did raise his hands to her, I mean, not just once . . . so much so that I grew up thinking it was normal. . . . It was some time before I knew it was wrong but it's coloured my attitude to marriage, made me accept less than what I deserve."

"Can you tell us about the circumstances at the time of her disappearance?" King asked.

Jennifer Steel sat back in her chair and caused the plastic to creak as she did so. "I thought about it, you know, at the time and later, you know how it is that things occur to you?"

King noticed how heavily the flat smelled of polish. He said, "Aye, I know what you mean."

"Well, I think my mother was having an affair. I didn't think so at the time, but as the years have gone by I think now that there was something going on between Mum and a guy at the golf club, a businessman, guy called Whelan, I think. Yes, Piers Whelan. A nice guy. I don't know what line of business he was in but I remember Mum and him chatting. I kept seeing them talking with each other, just talking, nothing else. Just sitting at the bar, a respectable distance between them. Or in the car park, in full view of other members, and to look at them you'd think there's two members who'd had a whisky after a round of golf once and who like each other's company and think no more of it. But I kept seeing them talking like that and it dawned on me that they were playing a sort of game of bluff, chatting openly, so as not to arouse suspicion, but nobody else ever seemed to be in earshot and now I think that they were talking closely, of intimate things. I tell you, something was going on between them, between Mum and Piers Whelan."

"Did your father suspect?" Montgomerie raised an eyebrow.

"Och, if he didn't the man was blind." Jennifer Steel shook her head. "Mind you, I didn't realise at the time and I was in the same household and went to the same golf club."

"What do you recall of the day your mother disappeared?"

"Tension," she replied after a pause. "I think I remember the tension most of all . . . more than normal that evening at dinner . . . a sense of something in the air. I was glad to get out and away to the dancing. I mean, I was twenty years old and, apart from the poison in the relationship between my parents, life was good, better than now. Anyway, I went out to the jiggin' and came home about one or two in the morning, went to my bed, nothing out of

the ordinary. I mean, no wrecked home, no blood splattered on the wallpaper, but I do remember an ambiance, I remember walking into the house and thinking, Something's happened."

"You didn't do anything? Didn't investigate?"

"No." She shook her head. "No, I didn't. I went to my bed, got up early the next day, and went to work. I had a job in a bank. Just a clerk, but looking back they were good times too, you don't know which are the good days till they've gone. Ever noticed that, no? Maybe you're too new. Maybe you're both too new. But it was the next evening when I came home from work to an empty house and my dad came in an hour or so later and said, 'Well, I've reported her missing, in much the same way that he would have done if he'd come in from the garden and said that he'd planted some peeps in the spare ground.'"

"Did your father have access to a small boat?"

"To get her body out into the reservoir, you mean? Yes, he did. He owned an inflatable, used it for fishing. Funny thing is, that boat didn't move all that winter except once, a few days after Mum disappeared. Dad hitched it up and towed it away. It was away for one night and the next day was propped up in the garage in the semi-inflated state he kept it in when it was being stored. He only really used it in the summers."

There was a momentary pause as both King and Montgomerie absorbed the implications of what Jennifer Steel had said. Montgomerie then asked, "If your father did murder your mother, if he disposed of the body a few days later, do you have any idea where he might have hidden her body in the interim? Not in the house, of course."

"No. The police searched the house and the garden and they searched Dad's business premises. He was a secondhand car dealer. I think that when they searched the garage they didn't know how close they'd come. Even if they opened all the cars and vans he had for sale and checked inside each of them. You see, I see now how easy it would have been for Dad to bundle Mum's body into his car, drive it to his garage, put her body in one of the cars he had for sale, and drive that car with her body in the boot out to the airport and leave it in the long-stay car park. You can leave a car for six weeks in that car park and he'd only need a few days. Once the police had searched our house and the garage, he could collect the body and dispose of it. No need to plan. Just needed a bit of quick thinking after the deed."

"Where is your father now?"

"In a geriatric hospital. He's in his late seventies and his mind has failed. Can I suggest you call on Piers Whelan? He's getting on too, but I understand from a friend of mine who works at the golf club that he's there each day and his mind is as sharp as a tack. The West of Scotland Club, on the Stirling Road."

Piers Whelan was a large, well-built man in his mid seventies. He had a mottled complexion and long strands of wispy white hair. He grasped a stout walking stick cut from a hazel tree and lovingly varnished and polished. King recognised the species of tree from which the stick was taken and also recognised a man who carried the stick for effect, rather than with good cause. Despite his years, it was King's impression that Piers Whelan wouldn't need any form of walking aid for many summers yet. Piers Whelan sat on a bench outside the bayed clubhouse window of the West of Scotland Golf Club. The cops sat at either side of him, grateful for the shade offered by the cool stone of the clubhouse building. "If you ask me," he said, "he did her in. The police thought so at the time, but without a body and without a confession, what could they do? Even with a confession they'd still need corroboration. One strand of evidence isn't sufficient under Scots law. But we all knew he did it."

"Can I ask the nature of your relationship with the deceased?" Montgomerie asked.

"Well," Piers Whelan pursed his lips, "I daresay you'd say we were having an affair. I was by myself, she was in a loveless and violent marriage, her only child was grown." He glanced sideways and watched two women in slacks and shirts pull golfing caddies across the gravel towards the first tee. Piers Whelan still had an eye for the ladies. King and Montgomerie followed his gaze and looked beyond the two players to the green and sand bunkers in the middle distance, to the dark blue hills on the skyline and the vastness of the blue sky beyond the hills. "We had been together for some time," Piers Whelan continued, bringing the attention of all back to the matter in hand. "She had promised again and again to come away with me but had always remained behind because of Jennifer, her daughter, same name, you see. Then things got so bad she said right, that's it, or words to that effect. I wanted her to slip away. I wanted her to get what documents she needed, what valuables, and meet me somewhere. I had plenty of

money. I'd buy her a new wardrobe, but she was a stubborn woman, oh my how stubborn. Anyway, we agreed to a rendezvous in a lay-by, she'd arrive in her car, we'd transfer to mine. . . . Silly stupid woman . . . I mean, I'm a millionaire twice over, but she wanted her things. . . . I could've bought anything she wanted. I'm in textiles, was, sold out now. People will always want food and clothing, so get yourself into the food industry or the clothing industry. . . ."

"We're in the police force."

"We're sorted, thanks all the same."

"No, I didn't mean that, I was just repeating what an old man said to me once when I was a young man. Took his advice and made my pile but I never had any success with the ladies until I met Mrs. Gregory. I met her here in the car park over there, still looks the same. The design of the cars are different now but it's still the same. Helped her carry her caddy to her car, she was struggling, a bit heavy for her, and we just clicked, the first and only time it has happened with me, sudden eye contact was a meeting of like minds. We met quite openly here at the club, pretended to be friends, didn't think people would suspect, but we had our liaisons, aye, so we did. I bought a flat in the West End, turned it into our love nest. Only two of us knew about it, me and her. Anyway, she decided finally to leave him, he was in the motor trade, you know, secondhand cars. I never have taken to people in the motor trade, a bit like publicans, too friendly, turn quickly, 'I'm only nice to you if you buy something from me' brigade. So we agreed to fly away, we'd meet at the lay-by, at six. She insisted on telling him to his face that she was leaving. I pleaded with her to phone him or write to him, but no, 'I want to see the look in his eyes,' she said. Confess I rather fancy she saw a look in his eyes all right, but not the look she was expecting to see. I waited for her and at midnight, when she hadn't shown up, I drove home. At the time I felt let down, I felt she'd changed her mind at the last minute. It was the only successful relationship I'd had with a lady. I was in my mid to late fifties then, last chance for me. I drove home feeling angry and bitter. Two days later I heard she was missing and then I knew he'd murdered her. Bottom of the reservoir, you say? Funny how your past can reach out and tap you on your shoulder, isn't it?" He shook his head. "Poor Jenny, oh my poor wee Jenny. If only she hadn't insisted on being so up-front and honest with him, she'd be sitting here beside me now, enjoy-

ing the sun in her declining years. I've been an honest man all my days, did well in business because of it, built up a reputation I'm still proud of. But sometimes it just doesn't pay to be honest."

"We moved him, aye, Davie Gregory." The staff nurse shook her head. "Just this morning, funny you should be asking about him. He was demented, they all are in here, but he wasn't a management problem, his mind is completely away, but now he's on Ward 27."

"Ward 27?"

"The lockup ward, for the dangerously senile. Not only are their minds completely away, but they're dangerous with it. They're full of drugs to keep them calm."

"What happened?" King suddenly saw the end of the case, a visit to Davie Gregory just for form's sake, a report to the Fiscal, who'd put his pen through it—a 'no pro' if ever there was one. The only beneficiary would be Jennifer Steel, née Gregory, who could now find her mother, also Jennifer Gregory, a more suitable resting place than the resting place she had occupied for the last twenty-one years.

"He tried to murder a nurse." The staff nurse continued to shake her head. "She'll be off with shock for some weeks now and we're short staffed as it is. See, on a psychogeriatric ward such as this, all the Alzheimer's disease patients seem to lock themselves into a particular part of their lives and relive it. For most it's a happy past, a golden childhood, a love affair. Sometimes it's less happy; we had one old boy who was reliving the time he was adrift in an open boat miles from the shipping lanes with no water to drink after his ship had been torpedoed and all his shipmates drowned. But Davie, he'd just sidle up to you and ask you to buy a car from him. He had all the patter, 'lovely runner, do you a good trade-in,' you know how it goes. . . ."

"Aye," said Montgomerie, still stung by the memory of his first car, purchased from a similar-sounding gentleman and which had proved to be a tin box full of problems.

"But just this morning he flies at a nurse, so he did, hands round her neck, really strangling her, arms bulging, eyes bulging, shouting at her, 'Nobody leaves me, nobody leaves me.' Took three male nurses to get him off her." ●

SONG WITHOUT SOUND

by Batya Swift Yagur

ADMISSION NOTES:

NAME: Holly Lee Carson

AGE: 7 yrs. 3 months

SEX: F

FAMILY: Parents: Mr. Norman Carson (lawyer), Mrs. Stacy Smith-Carson (homemaker). No siblings.

This seven-year-old Caucasian female was admitted through the Emergency Room at 1:45 A.M. after attempting to stab her father with a kitchen knife. The child has never been violent before, and is described by her mother as "docile." Father was treated for superficial injuries and released.

MEDICAL HISTORY: Other than the normal childhood illnesses (chicken pox at age four, an assortment of colds and croup), the child has enjoyed normal health, except for congenital deafness (cause unknown). Gestation normal, birth normal. She attends the Peyton School for the Hearing Impaired.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Immediate admission to Child Psych Unit 4 for observation. A staff therapist will be assigned, but therapy may be difficult because of hearing impairment. Attempts will be made to locate a nurse or other staff member conversant in American Sign Language to facilitate communication.

A woman of many talents (and responsibilities) Batya Swift-Yagur is a mother of five, a literary agent, a novelist, and a short-story writer. Her love for children comes out not only in this insightful new piece, but in her previous work for *EQMM*, especially 1994's "Me and Mr. Harry," the winner of that year's Robert L. Fish Award for best story by a new author. ¶



So of course, they found me. Jimmy's legacy: I know ASL, and I always get stuck playing middleman when someone deaf needs an interpreter. Last week it was this old man, drooling and slobbering all over the place, and the nurses and social workers had tried to communicate with him using a pad of paper, but his hands shook too much to write, so at the end it was me, the secretary from Patient Relations, who had to come and explain to him why he couldn't go back to his apartment and had to go to Manor Hill instead. I mean, it was crazy. What do I know about geriatrics?

Or pediatrics? Or psychiatric? But here I was, sitting with this freckle-faced, golden-haired kid whose eyes looked like something grabbed off an iceberg, and this purple-veined, yam-nosed doctor—Paul Sawyer, M.D.—who kept saying “Um, yes, so what do you have to tell me?” and trying to convince the kid that he was just here to help her.

Well, the kid wasn't buying it, and neither was I. Not that I had all that much sympathy for her, you understand. I swore after Jimmy died that I never wanted to have anything to do with anyone deaf as long as I lived. It was always Jimmy this and Jimmy that, Jimmy mustn't overdo things, how dare I ask him to sweep the floor or take out the trash, and wasn't I glad to help my poor little brother who couldn't even hear lovely music like I could, and would never lead a normal life. It was me dragging him by the hand at school, away from the other kids making fun of him (“dummy, dummy!”), and then having them make fun of me. It was me who had to interpret his signs to the nurses, sitting by his bedside in that hospital room when Mother went down for coffee and Dad was at work. Water, please, more pain pills.

And here I was again, another hospital (that job at the insurance company hadn't worked out, the import-export place had fallen through, and who could know I'd land something in a hospital? And that I'd be stupid enough to mention Jimmy and his deafness to Myrtle, the secretary from Social Services?), another kid, and me again running interference.

But this kid wasn't playing ball.

Rich kid, I could see that. Cashmere sweater, designer jeans—probably went to that fancy school for the deaf (only now they called them “hearing impaired”) that we couldn't afford, so Jimmy had to go to regular school, special classroom—and this kid was stony as they come.

The doctor was trying to talk to her. "She reads lips, that's what her parents said." There was something really desperate in the man's voice, a sort of whining. I knew it well. It used to creep into Mother's voice when she was begging Jimmy to have "one more little spoonful of cereal for Mommy" and he would close his eyes and pretend not to know she was talking to him.

That was the thing about deaf people: All they have to do is close their eyes and they can totally shut you out. This kid knew it too, and was doing it right now.

"Nothing you can do," I advised the doctor with the string of fancy letters after his name. "You can't *make* them listen to you."

"So what are you supposed to do?" The franticness was running all over his voice, like dogs set loose.

I shrugged. "Patience."

But he didn't have patience. He walked around and around the kid, badgering her with questions. "Why did you do it? Are you happy at home? What is your life like at school? Do you have any friends?" And when she didn't answer, his voice got even louder and harsher, like a carrot grater, even though he knew she couldn't hear him. "Why won't you talk to me? Don't you know I just want to help you? You're in serious trouble, and you need help!"

Some shrink! An ox could charge in and do a better job being gentle. I couldn't help it. I looked at the kid, sort of scrunched into a chair in the corner of the room, and I felt sorry for her. "I don't blame you, kid," I thought to myself. "I wouldn't open up to him either."

The doctor kept at it until I thought I would scream, and then the kid sneezed. You know how a sneeze is: Your whole body is shocked for a minute, and your eyes fly open. Well, that was my opportunity. "Hi," I signed.

Her mouth formed a little "O" and her fingers flew. "Who are you? Why are you here? How did you learn to sign?" The joy of an African who has just discovered that someone else speaks Swahili.

"June Morrison," I signed back. "I'm supposed to be translating here, since old doc don't know sign language."

I got a little wisp of a smile from my "old doc."

"I don't like him."

"Neither do I. Don't talk to him if you don't like him."

"What's she saying? What's she saying?" There was something pathetic about his eagerness.

"She's shy, she doesn't want to talk yet. I think we should give her time."

She tugged my sleeve. "What are you telling him?"

I told her and slipped a wink through the corner of my eye.

"Well, well," the doctor puffed. "We've made a good start, haven't we? We'll pick up again tomorrow."

We? The nerve! I might hate kids, but I hate doctors even more—especially shrinks. Hours and hours Mother, Dad, Jimmy, and I sat in front of shrinks, and much good it did all of us.

They shipped the kid back off to her room and I sat at my desk, trying to type a letter to some senator thanking him for his visit to the children's cancer unit, but my mind was on Jimmy. Suddenly there were his hands, clammy and sticky, clutching at mine, desperately forming words; and they were my shame and entrapment. "You're my best sister, you always take care of me." And the worst, that magic symbol, sign of the deaf, so much more powerful than the pale words, that crossing of the arms over the heart—"I love you, June."

For I knew that my love was tainted, the jealousy stifling it like the tumor that was encroaching upon his aural nerves. That Jimmy, sweet, drooping Jimmy, the Jimmy who stole my parents' hearts and love (and I knew that when they looked at me, they asked themselves why it was Jimmy, not me, who was deaf and doomed), the Jimmy who summoned sighs to the lips and tears to the eyes, streams of checks from accounts too arid to support tennis lessons or dance class for me. Jimmy, whom I had wished dead, and who had obliged me only too well.

Damn him. Fifteen years later, I was still dragging around his corpse.

She was more communicative the next day. Smiled at me when we walked in. And what could I do? Faced with the dour and self-righteous Dr. Sawyer and the kid with a tiny sparkle someplace on her face, I was going to opt for the kid.

Even though I hated kids. Especially deaf ones.

"So what happened, kid? Why'd you do it?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Can't tell."

"Why not?"

She shook her head again. "If you try to make me, I'll shut my eyes and never open them."

You can bet that got me mad. Poor, helpless Jimmy, he always got Mom to cry by squeezing his eyes shut. "Go ahead," I said meanly. "I don't give a damn."

Her eyes opened wide and she clapped a hand to her mouth.

"You're nasty."

I shrugged. "You can call me that if you want."

All the while, Sawyer had been sort of bouncing in his chair, swiveling it back and forth behind his desk, clearing his throat. That wasn't a frog stuck in there, that was him trying to signal us—hey, I'm the doctor around here! It was so obvious, I would have laughed except that I wanted to cry instead. "Well?"

"She says she's going to shut her eyes again."

"But—"

"Don't worry." And I took delight in my rude tone. "She can't keep them shut forever. She relies on them too much, even more than we do. She'll eventually open them. We just have to wait it out."

And the kid did—but only when the session was over.

Still—something had gotten to me about her. This wasn't any helpless, whimpering, pathetic mass of jelly like Jimmy had been. The kid had spunk (anyone who went after Daddy with a kitchen knife had to have a certain amount of something), and she was stubborn. Plus, I've always loved mysteries. Take them out of the library by the armful. This was better than the best paperback, because it was happening in real life. I knew I had to get to the bottom of it, and the kid wasn't exactly going to be helpful.

I looked at her face, closed as her eyes, the next day, looked at the paneled idiocy of Dr. Sawyer's gaze, and knew I'd been roped in.

And that this was my chance to make it all up to Jimmy. I had wished him dead, had gotten my wish, had thrown away a child's life, and here was a kid I could restore.

If I could only find out the truth.

So I started with her parents. Called in sick and went to visit. Dad was none too cooperative. Mr. Carson was Mr. Business personified. Pinstriped suit, fraternity tie clip, briefcase open on his desk (I went to see him at the firm of Carson and Macklin, where he was a partner), an air of hurriedness about the room. He was

clearly involved in Very Important Business, and who was I to interrupt?

"I've been asked to translate for your daughter—the therapist doesn't know sign language."

He nodded and muttered something gruff.

"Excuse me?" He wasn't going to intimidate me. I knew the type: rich, full of self-importance, and—underneath it all—nothing but mush. A scared little boy. They all were.

"I said, they should have let her mother translate."

I let that one go by. Bring Mom in, and you can kiss therapy goodbye, even if Dr. Sawyer were a saint.

"Do you have any ideas why your daughter might, er, attack you the way she did?"

He shook his head, his eyebrows pulling into a frown. "Haven't a clue."

"Well, did anything happen in her life within the last few weeks? You know, something unusual?"

He seemed to hesitate. "Her grandmother died last month."

And no one had mentioned that? No one had seen fit to put it in her chart? "How'd she take it?"

He shrugged again. "Kid's locked in her own world. I never could get through to her. Mildred—she was my mother—she could. Holly was devoted to her. Always the two of them off in some corner, with their fingers moving a mile a minute, always stopped when her mother or I came up, like they were sharing secrets together."

If Jimmy had been lucky enough to have such a loving grandma in his childhood, would he be alive now?

"Did Holly go to her funeral?"

He looked shocked. "Of course not. It wouldn't be appropriate for a child. And anyway, what could she get out of it? She couldn't hear the speeches, after all."

Poor Holly. Stuck away in a bedroom—had they given her a lollipop to keep her occupied, or maybe hired a jolly babysitter to take her to the park—while Mom and Dad went off to their grown-up funeral of the person in the world she loved the most.

"Did your mother live with you?"

He shook his head. "Across the street. You could actually see right into her house from ours. At night, Holly used to spend hours with her head pressed to the window in the living room, just watching my mother move around her house, and then they'd

wave to each other. They had this real crazy waving thing. It used to drive me nuts."

"So did she start to act different after Grandma died?"

"No, not until she went after me with this knife."

I thanked him and he muttered something else—something about work, the curses of handicapped children—and I went to his house to have a chat with Mom.

Mrs. Smith-Carson had apparently squeezed me between the Ladies' Guild luncheon and the Children's Aid Society Benefit Fashion Show. Honeyed hair, honey-colored shirt, a voice like honey dripping over steel. Wary of me, I could tell. No, Holly had never acted up before. Yes, she had been very close to her grandmother. "When Mildred—that was my mother-in-law—was around, Norman and I didn't exist for her. Of course, Norman and I are busy much of the time—we have many social obligations—and so she did spend a lot of time with Mildred."

"How did your mother-in-law die?"

"She had a heart condition, and she was found dead on her living room floor. Heart attack. She'd apparently tried to get to her nitro pills, but it was too late and the bottle was up on a high shelf, where she couldn't reach it from the floor. Norman was shocked. He had just come back from visiting her and she'd seemed fine, he said."

"How did Holly act after she died?"

Mrs. Smith-Carson shrugged, an elegant gesture, you could see the finishing-school education in the graceful sweep of the shoulders. "I'd say more *quiet*—well, that's an odd word to use about someone deaf—but really she clammed up. Norman didn't notice it, of course, he doesn't pick up on these things, but I did. I tried to engage her—"

And then the porcelain face crumpled, and I mean suddenly there were human tears cascading down the made-up cheeks. Well, would you look at that, I thought. Mrs. Hoity-Toity crying.

"I hated Mildred for it, for stealing my daughter. First our money—Norman bankrolled that house, but Mildred wouldn't hear of going to a nursing home, so Norman paid for everything and believe me, it didn't come easy. People think we're so rich, but no one knows, no one knows." She rummaged in her sleek bag for a tissue and blew her nose, making perfectly plebeian noises. "And then Holly—she clung to the old lady, and none of the rest of us existed."

"So you weren't exactly on good terms with your late mother-in-law?"

"You might say that." One last delicate daub of the nostrils—gentility restored—and she glanced at her watch. "Goodness, I'll be late for the luncheon. Thanks for your interest in my daughter, and let me know if there's any other way I can be of help."

The words swirled around my head as I drove back to the hospital. Clung to Grandma. Not on good terms. Found dead in the living room. Pills out of reach. He'd just come back from visiting her. A kaleidoscope of images, sounds, a mosaic, a puzzle to be fitted together.

It was time to have a little chat with Holly.

Out of the therapy room, of course.

I found her in the craft room where a bunch of kids were sitting around the table, pummeling some clay. One was rocking back and forth, one was moaning softly about poisons and sprays or something like that.

The kid was sitting quietly, the clay an inert lump in her hand.

I looked at her again and cursed silently. Kids. How the hell had I gotten involved with one, and a deaf one at that?

But the thoughts were chased away, like raindrops, by the sunshine of her smile.

"Let's talk," I signed.

"Okay, but no questions." Her hands moved decisively, but her face looked less certain.

"Just one, then we stop if you want."

She nodded, a tiny, guarded gesture.

"What did your father say to your grandmother?"

And she became undone. Began to scream, hoarse, broken noises, sounds of unused vocal cords, the piercing and rusty stabs of a wounded raven, shrieking, shrieking, clawing at the table, at me, at herself. Everyone in the craft room turned around, one child scuttled under the table, another flung his clay at the wall. An attendant rushed to push an alarm button on the wall, but I signaled to her with a shake of my head, holding up my hand. No. Wait.

I grabbed Holly, held her tight, restrained her flailing arms and kicking legs. The dam had burst, my wall had been pierced, and suddenly it was Jimmy I was holding, rocking, crooning words of comfort into his unhearing ears, bridging the gap between his

aloneness and my own. Saying, signing those words of mystery, that heart-clutch of vulnerability, I love you, I love you, I love you.

And she quieted slowly, her shouts subsiding, murmurs now, as I gently led her out of the craft room and into the day room next door.

"Don't tell me, I'll tell you," I said to her. "You were looking out the window into your grandma's living room. And you watched your father talking to her."

"He was facing the window." Her fingers were moving slowly, labored, as if she were herself an old lady trying to push the signs through gnarled and arthritic joints. "I saw his lips. They were arguing. About money. About me. He said she milks him dry. I didn't get it, because Grandma is allergic to milk. She never drinks it, and we have plenty of milk in the fridge. I couldn't see her mouth. I just saw the back of her head." She was shaking, and I put my arm around her. "Then I saw Daddy. He said, plus you've stolen my daughter. She doesn't have the time of day for me."

She stopped, a frown drawing her little eyebrows together. I was reminded of her father's face before me in his office. "I'm not stolen. And I know how to tell time." She shook her head, then began to sign fast, the words tumbling over her fingers. "And it was quiet. Grandma must've said something. And then he said—He said—"

She put her hands down, twisting the fingers together.

I grabbed them gently, waving them in front of her face. "Go on. You can't stop now."

"He said, I'm going to kill you."

I gasped as it all fell into place. I took Holly in my arms, and I knew then that she had guessed it all. The pills out of reach—no sensible elderly person would place her pills on the highest shelf—gave it away.

They had quarreled, that was clear, and Grandma must have needed her nitro pills. Had she clutched at her chest? Had her breathing become labored, her face grey? Had she asked for her pills? It didn't matter, but surely her son knew the warning signs. Knew it was essential to get her the pills, maybe call 911. Nothing simpler than putting them on the highest shelf, where she couldn't get to them. She could quietly die and no one but a lip reader; whose hobby was to watch Grandma in her living room, would ever find out.

"He deserves to die too." The fingers spoke with chilling matter-of-factness.

And what could I say to her? Mumble about forgiveness when it had eluded me, like strains of sweet music, unnoticed by deaf ears? All I could do was embrace her, crying.

And then the aftermath, destruction before reconstruction:

A beginning, a validation, as the police found his fingerprints on the nitro bottle; the cleaning lady confirmed that she always kept one bottle on the coffee table, a second on the kitchen table, a third on the night table, she was neurotic, in fact, about keeping them always within reach; as the time of death was determined—fifteen minutes after he had left her house—and as Norman Carson, in his pinstriped suit with his brimming appointment book in his briefcase, was led off to jail in non-patrician handcuffs.

A beginning, as Holly tearfully recounted to me (and to her new therapist, Dr. Carla Webber) how Daddy had told her to stay in her room like a good girl while he went across the street to visit Grandma for a few minutes. How she had disobeyed him by going down to the living room and watching him cross the street to Grandma's. How she had seen a terrible argument, had watched Daddy leave, then saw her grandma sink down. If only Mommy had been home, but Mommy was out at a hospital benefit dinner . . . And she was so afraid to tell Daddy—he was the one who had done it, after all. She had tried to call the operator, but couldn't make the sounds come out. In the end she had to wait, watching the house where her grandmother lay dying, then dead on the floor, until Mommy came home and routinely went in to check on her mother-in-law.

A beginning, as Stacy Smith-Carson broke down, knelt in front of Holly, and in a confessional chant, her fingers signing the dirge of her voice, foreswore meetings, luncheons, promised to spend more time with her daughter. "I can't be your grandmother, but I can at least be your mother."

A beginning, as I stood, wet cheek to wet cheek, saying goodbye to the child who had punctured the shield.

Reconstruction.

A beginning, as I stood by Jimmy's grave, a bunch of roses awkwardly clutched in my hand, crossing my arms over my heart in that mystical sign of the deaf, pantomimed union, embrace without sound. ●



BY LETTER AND AFFECTION

by Terry Mullins

"Preferment goes by letter and affection." Othello (1.1.36)

The knock came at Cheiro Bey's door at nine o'clock at night. He had come back to the office after supper to meet someone who signed himself Benjamin Cellini. The note requesting the meeting had been accompanied by a fifty-dollar bill. Bey was interested.

He rose and opened the door to his visitor. His first impression was that the man certainly was not Italian. He might be Middle Eastern, perhaps even Egyptian with his sallow skin and finely chiseled features. Of somewhat less than middle height, elegantly

dressed, and moving with the unconscious stealth of a tiger, the man entered, bowed slightly to Bey, and extended a carefully manicured hand. His grip was strong and his attitude was that of a man who knows what he wants and gets it.

"Please sit down," Bey said, seating himself at his desk. "Your note was rather vague about what you want of me."

"Intentionally vague and deliberately typewritten. There are several things that I want, but first I would request that you analyze my handwriting." He took out his wallet and removed six fifty-dollar bills. "Will that be enough?"

"Very likely, but I'd like some information first. Why did you come to me instead of some well-publicized graphologist? Or have you been to them first?"

"No. I am a man who seeks only the best. I have read your articles. I know of your work with the New York police. You are the best. I am willing to pay."

The man smiled an ethereal smile. Bey tried to find a comparison for it. Saintly? No, it was too sensual to be saintly. Mephistophelean? No, it was too delicate, too subtle for Mephistopheles. Aesthetic! That was the word, a man who seeks only the best, an aesthete.

"I will want a fairly extensive sample of your handwriting."

"I assumed you would. Here is a paragraph I have written for the purpose." He took from his pocket a sheet of blue paper, lightly scented, written in purple ink.

Bey accepted it, looked at it briefly, and said, "Thank you. I may examine it later. For now I wish you to copy a specific text on paper I use for such purposes." He took four sheets of white paper with light blue lines printed on them. "Stay within the margins as indicated. There are lines at the top and at the bottom. Begin at the top line and end at the bottom for each sheet." He took a book

In his new story featuring handwriting expert Cheiro Bey, Philadelphian Terry Mullins makes use of some real scientific studies, by Kanfer, to support the idea that disease might be detected through handwriting analysis. He has taken the liberty of fictionally embellishing the science, a license amply justified by the ingenious mystery he has produced. †

from his bookcase and opened it. "The third epistle of John is the shortest book in the Bible. Copy it entire."

His visitor looked at the book with no great enthusiasm and asked, "Couldn't you at least use the King James? I despise these modern translations."

"I'm sorry. That is what I always use. I have quite a collection of—"

"I know. I understand. I hate being compared with others. But if this is the way you work, I guess I'll have to comply." He took out a jade-colored pen and began to write. The ink was purple and scented. Bey waited patiently. When the man finished, Bey took the writing, glanced at it and then at the man. Then he looked through all the pages with astonishment.

"You are a superb forger," he said.

The man smiled his ethereal smile and lifted his right eyebrow. "How did you know?" he asked.

"I know Thomas Jefferson's handwriting when I see it," Bey replied. "But page after page without an original to copy! May I see your driver's license?"

The man took out his wallet, extracted the license, and handed it across the desk. Bey laughed. "The name is Benjamin Cellini, but the handwriting is Paul Revere. Do you have credit cards?"

The man, obviously enjoying sharing his joke with someone who could appreciate it, handed over a dozen credit cards. All were signed Benjamin Cellini but no two signatures were alike. Bey chuckled. "Winston Churchill, Mark Twain, De Gaulle, one I don't recognize, and you used Fidel Castro's handwriting for your American Express card."

"The one you do not recognize is Julia Childs's on the Diner's Club."

"So, what do you really want of me?"

"I want you to analyze someone's handwriting and tell me what that person's weakness is."

"Sorry, that doesn't sound like the sort of thing I'll care to do."

"I'd pay you well. I do not intend harm to this person."

"I'm sure you would pay well."

"You can tell a person's weakness from the person's handwriting?"

"Probably, but only for the person herself."

"What makes you think it is a woman?"

"You carefully avoided gender-specific pronouns."

"I see." He sat thinking for a while. Not a muscle moved. His unlined face was expressionless. His light gray eyes stared unseeing. For two minutes he seemed hardly to breathe.

Then he said, "I'll tell you about her. It seems the only way I can get you to help me.

"For the past two years I have been living with a wonderful woman. She left me the first of last month and I have been devastated ever since. There are not many things that disturb me—for long. I get what I want one way or another. I want her back." It was in a cold, implacable tone that he spoke the last words.

Then he changed. "May I smoke?" he asked.

Bey hesitated before replying. The man's glance was sharp as an eagle's. He had surely seen that there were no ashtrays in the room. He was testing Bey again, inviting a refusal, probing to see how to deal with Bey's refusals.

"By all means," Bey replied. The man took out a gold cigarette case and opened it. Inside were specially-made cigarettes, over half of each an elaborate filter. He extended the case to Bey, who refused. The man looked pleased. He lit the cigarette with a jeweled gold lighter, took a few puffs, and said, "What more do you need to know?"

Bey laughed and said, "You don't have to smoke if you don't want to."

"What do you mean?"

"You use the cigarette routine as a ploy. Your gold cigarette case is a nice touch, much less obvious than if it were platinum. And your specialty cigarettes are impressive. But you are not a smoker. You only use them on special occasions when you are testing someone in some way. They've dried out since you last used them. The paper flared up a bit when you applied the flame. A few grains of tobacco dropped out. And you have copied someone else's way of smoking."

The man laughed a self-conscious laugh and said, "Thanks. I'll put fresh cigarettes in more often. It never occurred to me that they got stale. And it was Edward R. Murrow I copied. Where can I put this thing?"

"In the sink over there."

"Your abilities extend beyond analysis of handwriting, I see."

"One's handwriting is an extension of one's self. After years of handwriting analysis, noticing personality traits has become a habit."

"I understand. It's one I cultivate, too. But it doesn't work with her, perhaps because she is too important to me. I can't be objective." He paused and continued in a colder voice, "She took everything I had given her, jewels, clothes, gifts from all over the world. But she stole nothing. She took only what I had given her. Now she is singing in a nightclub again.

"She has no family, no close friends, nothing I can use as a hold over her. I could get her fired, but she would only find another job. I don't want to be hounding her. I want her to come back on her own. But to do that I have to find some flaw in her character, some weakness I can exploit. Unfortunately, I am too infatuated with her to be completely rational.

"Someone like you, on the other hand, could study her handwriting—the extension of her self—and find those personality traits which cause her to make decisions. Here, this is one of her letters."

He handed Bey four pages of cream paper covered with neat, even writing in India black ink.

Bey looked at the letter briefly and said, "This is your copy of her letter."

The man winced. "I assure you," he said, "it is a faithful reproduction of her script. There are things in the original that I do not want anyone to see."

"It's no good. I have said that you are a superb forger, but I recognized immediately that this is your work. I cannot examine her handwriting by looking at something that you have written in her style."

The man who called himself Benjamin Cellini rose slowly, his face expressionless, his light gray eyes half closed as if to shield his thoughts. Bey rose too and moved slowly toward the door. His guest was reluctantly trying to come to a decision. Bey did not want to intrude on the process.

As he left, the man said quietly, "I shall have to think this over carefully. You will hear from me in two days."

Bey gave the man a few minutes to use the elevator and then picked up the telephone. He called Lieutenant Cogbill of the police department. "Lieutenant, what can you tell me about a Benjamin Cellini?"

There was silence a moment, and the Lieutenant said cautiously, "What is it you want to know?"

"Is that his real name?"

"That's his name, all right. What makes you ask?"

"He's obviously not Italian, yet he has many characteristics in common with Benvenuto Cellini. The coincidence is too pat. I'm sure he chose the name himself. Do you know his family?"

"So far as I know, he has no family, but he is well known in certain exclusive circles of New York society and has been for a good many years. Why the interest?"

"He wants me to analyze some handwriting for him."

"That sounds harmless enough. But watch your step."

"I will."

So . . . the lieutenant didn't want to say any more about Mr. Cellini than he had to. That added greatly to Bey's feeling of unease. There was something quietly dangerous about Benjamin Cellini. And somewhere—not in any of the big cities but probably in some small town somewhere—there was, Bey was sure, a record of the legal change of name from Ali something or other to Benjamin Cellini, an obscure background well covered.

His curiosity aroused, Bey set out to find the woman. It was not difficult, and the next evening Bey took his wife to the nightclub for dinner. He expected to find someone like Eartha Kitt, sensual, seductive, half singing and half purring her songs. Instead, Lili Swan was a vivacious blonde with a clear lilting voice and an accurate sense of pitch. A bit tall for a woman, she was slim but not sinuous. Her choice of songs was upbeat and drawn from the thirties and forties. Her singing was enjoyable, perhaps memorable, but not sensational. Bey tipped a waiter to ask her to join them after her performance. She did so, they ordered drinks for three, and Bey said, "That was one of the most delightful renditions of 'All for One and One for All' that I've ever heard. Gracie Fields never sang it better, I'm sure."

"Thank you. Most people have never heard any of my songs before. I'm sure you never heard Gracie Fields in person."

"No, only on recordings, but some of my older friends actually knew her. Miss Swan, I'll be frank with you; I came here to meet you because a man called Cellini told me about you. Before I have anything to do with him, I wanted to speak with you."

She seemed to freeze. "Are you a private detective?"

"No, I am not a detective of any sort."

"Is Benji a friend of yours?"

"No, I just met him in the last couple of days."

"Then drop him. Have nothing to do with him."

"Why?"

"Because he is heartless, ruthless, and cruel."

"He didn't strike me that way. He seemed cold and self-contained, determined, and efficient, a magnetic personality."

"He's all of that, all right. He's intelligent, even brilliant, and we had some grand times together until . . ."

"Until what?"

She was silent.

"Did he beat you?"

"No, not physically. He loved me too much to do that. That was the trouble, he loved me too much. And I loved him, until . . ."

She looked up with tears in her eyes. "Did he send you?" she asked.

"No, he didn't even give me your name. I had to find out for myself who you were and where you were singing. But what he told me about you made me determined to seek you and talk with you."

"You want my life's story?"

"No, I want to know more about Cellini. I think you can tell me more about him than anyone but himself."

"You're right, I guess. But why should I?"

"I don't know. My wife and I are strangers to you. I can't give you a reason in the world why you should tell us things that no doubt hurt a lot even to think about."

She looked from one to the other of them, laughed, and said, "You've got the damndest approach I ever heard. But I've been wanting, even needing, to talk about Benji. There's no one I can really talk with, not about him. Maybe a couple of strangers is the best audience I can find."

She laughed again, they ordered another round of drinks, and she began.

"He heard me sing and sent me his card and asked if he might see me after my final number. I said okay and he came to my dressing room and invited me to a party the next evening. He mentioned some of the most famous people in Manhattan as among those who would be his guests, and I was sort of overwhelmed. Finally, I accepted.

"He said he would like for me to wear certain clothes and he gave me a note to the manager of one of the finest stores in the city. So he takes me to this party dressed in the most expensive

clothes I ever wore and I meet senators and bankers and a lot of people I never dreamed I'd see in person. But he was the most fascinating of the lot. He could talk about anything—music, art, politics, travel, sports, show business.

"And everyone respected him. I guess they feared him, too, but I didn't realize that until later. The politicians hung on every word he spoke about international affairs. The bankers pumped him about international finance. And yet he did not dominate the group or even stand out. I clipped all the newspaper accounts of the party the next day and they all mentioned him briefly as giving the party and then went on to write up the big shots. I actually got more coverage than he did and there wasn't much about me.

"That was the start. We went out steadily for a while and then I moved in and lived with him for two years. Mostly it was wonderful. I'd never met anyone like him. He was wealthy and generous—not a common combination—and he took me all around the world. I saw the Russian ballet and the slums of Harar. He is a munitions dealer. He doesn't make the things. He buys up guns, tanks, planes, ships, all sorts of weapons from all over the world. And then he sells them to African tribesmen, Philippine rebels, South American revolutionaries. Usually he doesn't even see the things he sells or the people who use them. He just talks with a German politician and a Sudanese ambassador and pockets money from both.

"Along the way I got to meet the elite of Europe and exiled princes of the Middle East. It was wonderful. Benji was so kind, so generous, so loving. I wanted it to go on forever."

She stopped, her face aglow with remembered happiness.

After a while Bey prompted, "Until . . ."

She took a deep breath and the happiness vanished.

"Benji was jealous," she said. "I didn't realize how jealous he was. I thought he loved me the same way I loved him. He asked me about my affairs and I told him. I told him about the unhappy married man who seduced me when I was seventeen and who kept on promising to divorce his wife and marry me. That went on for three years until he was transferred to London. He took his wife and three kids and left me behind. I told him about the three other men in my life. I asked him why he wanted to hear about them when it obviously hurt him, but he said he loved me so much he wanted to know all about me. So I told him.

"And then one day I heard from an old friend that Henry, the married man in London, had been shot and killed by a thief. It happened at night on Cheyne Walk, of all places. I was shocked, of course.

"Less than a week later I read that a man had been murdered in Bridgeport. The circumstances were such that I looked into it and found out that it was another of the men I had told Benji about. To make a long story short, he had each one of those men killed. That's not just jealousy. That's madness. I couldn't stay with him any longer. I left. He's been after me ever since to come back. He doesn't even seem to realize that what he did was wrong. I said he is heartless, ruthless, and cruel. But that doesn't begin to tell what I feel about him."

"You hate him?"

"Not really. I still love him as I did, but I can't stand to think about what he did. Those were nice guys, not too bright some of them, selfish all of them, but who isn't? They didn't deserve killing. And he didn't even kill them himself; he paid someone to do it."

Bey sat transfixed. The women looked at him. Lili sobbed, "What can I do?"

"I think you should go back to him," Bey said.

Both women gasped.

"Why?" Lili asked. "Even if I could, why should I? Because I said I still love him? That's not good enough. Give me a better reason."

"Because he has less than six months to live."

She was stunned. "How do you know?"

"I am a scientist. I analyze handwriting. Years ago Kanfer did studies on detecting cancer by analysis of one's handwriting. I have built on that and developed ways of relating certain indicators in the handwriting to cancer in certain parts of the body. If in the course of several pages of script the indicators correlate with respiration, it signifies cancer of lungs. If they correlate with mental activity—which may show in the way paragraphs, sentences, or in extreme cases words are begun—they signify intracranial cancer. That is what I detected in Mr. Cellini. The frequency and distinctive marks of those indicators showed me that his condition is terminal. The end will come soon and sudden."

"I still don't understand. . . ."

Mrs. Bey joined the conversation for the first time. "My dear," she said, "my husband writes long dull articles for medical jour-

nals and thinks that everybody reads them. The point he is trying to make is that when he saw Cellini's handwriting, he recognized symptoms of a disease, a deadly disease which will surely kill Mr. Cellini within six months, probably sooner. If you can forgive a dying man . . ."

"Oh! Is that the way it is?"

Bey shrugged and laughed. "My wife explains things better than I do," he said.

Lili relaxed and said, "So she does."

Bey continued, "He says he doesn't want to hound you, but he will. His obsession will drive him to it. It will be pretty bad for both of you."

"Is his obsession related to his disease?"

"In a way. It's aggravated by it, certainly."

"Poor Benji. He's finally up against something he can't control. But he's smart. If I agree to go back to him now, he'll suspect something."

"He'll come to you. I won't tell you what I have in mind because I want your surprise to be genuine."

She ran both hands through her hair, sending it in golden cascades. "Talk about rendering good for evil! All right. If you can pull it off, I'll do it. Poor Benji."

As they left the nightclub, Bey's wife said, "I hope you know what you are doing."

"So do I."

When Benjamin Cellini arrived the next evening, he was less well composed than he had been. He had the air of a man who has not slept well and who has reached a decision which displeases him. His finely chiseled face seemed a bit more tense, as if the sallow skin had been drawn tighter over the bone. He smiled a salesman's smile and Bey felt himself in the presence of an international munitions dealer. Cellini walked easily over to the chair he had used before and sat unbidden. In his hands he held a small briefcase which he opened with the air of one about to display the finest jewels of the Orient.

"I have here," he said, "six letters which the young woman wrote me. How many will you need?"

"Three or four pages will be enough."

Some of the tension left Cellini. He handed a letter eight pages

long to Bey and said, "I have masked out several long sections which I do not wish to show. Is that all right?"

"This should do quite well."

Bey studied the censored letter, then looked up and said, "She would appear to be an intelligent person. I have only one suggestion to make. I recommend that you ask her to marry you."

"Marriage?" The look on the other's face showed that he had never considered the possibility.

"If you want her back, that is the only way."

"But what makes you think she will marry me?"

"You sought my expert opinion. That is it."

"Well, surely I will . . . I mean, if that is what you think. . . . Do you really think she will marry me?"

"I don't know if she will or not, but that is the only suggestion I have to offer."

Somewhat dazed, Benjamin Cellini rose and shook hands. "Thank you," he said. He repeated it several times as he left.

A week later Bey received an envelope containing a check for thirty thousand dollars and a newspaper clipping about the wedding of Benjamin Cellini and Lili Swan.

Two weeks passed and his wife found him reading a long letter written on cream paper in India black ink. He handed it to her. When she finished she said, "Apparently they are both very happy. Maybe you did the right thing. I wasn't sure at the time."

"I see now why he masked out parts of the letter he let me read."

"Yes, she is an uninhibited writer, isn't she?"

Two months passed and they received a cream-colored envelope with no letter, just a clipping from a French newspaper saying that industrialist B. Cellini had drowned while swimming at Nice. In calm Mediterranean waters he had simply gone under without calling for help. He was dead when they brought him ashore.

"I wonder if she or one of his business associates will wind up with the millions," Bey mused.

"I'm sorry for Lili," his wife sympathized.

"She was lucky. It could have happened when he was piloting a plane or driving a car with her as passenger."

Over a year later they got the last cream-colored envelope. It contained another check for thirty thousand dollars. It was signed Lili Cellini.

"I see she inherited," Bey said. ●

PLAYING AWAY

by Phil Lovesey



Whenever I read the problems page, there's nearly always a guilt-laden letter from a distraught mother who's stumbled over some sad dilemma described in her angst-ridden teenage daughter's diary. In response, the agony aunt always gives the same advice, that the confused child secretly wanted the diary discovered, and that this in some way should assuage the mother's guilt, and ready her for dealing with the crisis head-on. John would cling to the same reasoning, arguing that he gave me enough warning signs, and my refusal to recognise the symptoms prompted the spread of the disease.

At thirty-seven, after eleven years of marriage, two kids, a semi-detached house, and a company car, John had an affair. John, my John, good old dependable reliable John. The man least likely to "play away," bedding the most obvious of nubile clichés—a girl from the typing pool.

And when I finally confronted him, he pulled the shabbiest trick. Somehow his rampant meandering was my fault. Hadn't he left enough clues? Surely my lack of interest in the new aftershaves, clothes, late nights at the office, bank withdrawals—surely it all pointed to a marked lack of interest in him? So he really couldn't be blamed for responding to another's interest, could he? The

As this issue goes to the newsstands, copies of Phil Lovesey's first novel will be arriving at bookstores in Britain. The up-and-coming English writer is the son of *EQMM* favorite Peter Lovesey. He has already shown his prowess as a short-story writer by finishing in the top ten in 1995's MWA short-story contest. His new novel, *Death Duties*, will be published by HarperCollins in the U.K., but has not yet found an American publisher. ¶

supercilious agony aunts of my imagination raced to his defence, berating my lack of action and attention to the all-too-obvious warning signs. For them, John's pathetic attempts to rejuvenate himself with tight trousers and an absurd new haircut were the selfsame cry for help as the maudlin teenager's diary of woe.

But I wasn't having that. No way. I'd seen it all from the start, and simply refused to lower myself to his level. If John's infatuation was supposedly a cry for help, then I simply refused to open my ears. I found the whole situation sordid and despicable. I vowed revenge and set about the task with cold-hearted enthusiasm.

It took me a week to devise an appropriate punishment. By now, John had sworn he'd given the girl up, but left veiled threats that he couldn't be blamed for his action if he wasn't met with supper on the table cooked lovingly by a wife willing to tuck the kids up in bed then be a whore in his. I welcomed his devious scheming; it merely furthered my own.

Each day, after kissing him gently on the cheek to speed him to the office, I immersed myself in a different culture, gleaning all I could. I quickly became an expert, furiously digesting every snippet, reading the tabloids, scanning the pages for black-and-white pictures of scarred young men, freshly stitched and bandaged, faces pulped and staring back from the confines of a hospital bed. The championship race, crews, baseball bats, Stanley knives, pubs, colours, and above all else game schedules. In six weeks, I was at home in a world John was completely ignorant of.

The school spring fete was looming. John, in his quest for respectability, had offered both our services to the PTA from the moment our eldest walked through the gates. This year we had offered to run a stall, or rather he had, figuring I would do most of the hard work preparing the damn thing while he turned up on the Saturday afternoon in question and took the lion's share of the credit.

"I thought we could be bees this year," I told him as I served supper attentively. "I'm going to make costumes for us both, and a large honeycomb out of cardboard. People will have to throw a ball into one of the holes. I thought three balls for fifty pence, with a jar of honey for winners?"

"Whatever," he replied.

So I set about the task, taking a break from my more threatening research to cut, glue, and paint the stall. At nights I toiled on

the costumes with needle and thread, sewing bright yellow hoops onto black jerseys, fixing bobbing antennae onto old hairbands, while John, bored with my domestic chores, began "working late" again.

The Saturday came, a bright sunny afternoon, with John and me resplendent as busy-bees, dressed in our hooped sweaters and black tights, laughing and joking with parents and children alike. And John loving the attention, crediting my labour as his own, blissfully unaware that five miles away the muscled thigh of a man he'd never met had sealed his fate before a screaming multitude of thousands.

At five o'clock, we packed away, counting our proceeds and waving friends goodbye. John threw off his antennae, slipped jeans on over his tights, and began to fidget. He was anxious to get away, anxious to see her. He packed the car silently and swiftly, strapping the children into their seats and gunning the engine. This was the moment, my moment, my ultimatum.

I turned to him. "I know you're still seeing her."

He said nothing, tight-lipped, gripping the wheel.

"She rang. This morning, when you were in the bath."

"What?"

"She said there's something she needs to tell you," I lied. "Urgently."

"When I was in the bath?"

I did my level best to look shamefaced. "I thought about not telling you. But I couldn't." I looked at my watch. Five-fifteen, time enough for drink to have loosened the demons. "She's waiting for you in the Red Lion. It's near town, I think." I grasped his hand, offering him a choice. "Let's just go home, John. I'll make you forget all about her."

But as I knew well, he wanted it both ways. He gave it his best shot. "I'll have to see her," he said, making it sound like some dreadful chore. "She phoned you? It must be serious. Drop me at this pub, take the kids home, and I'll be back in an hour. Then that's the end of it, I promise. Now, where is this place?"

I smiled meekly, then sat obediently by his side as we trailed towards town, giving him vague directions towards the back-street pub which had figured so largely in my research. We drew up outside at six, John leaping from the car in his enthusiasm to be reunited with his mistress. I slid into the driver's seat and pulled away, watching in the rearview mirror as he swiftly

crossed the road and entered his hell of my own making. The last thing I glimpsed was his yellow and black jumper disappearing inside.

The following morning I read the papers before taking the children to the hospital. The football championship was over, following Darren Black's eighty-fourth-minute away winner for Rovers against United the previous afternoon. The match report detailed the pitch invasion and subsequent fighting on the terraces as United fans vented their fury on the visiting opposition.

The final paragraph told of an incident which occurred after the game. Apparently a lone Rovers fan burst into a pub frequented by some of United's most fanatical supporters. He was now in hospital in stable but critical condition.

When Rovers play away, they always wear black and yellow. ❶

THE WEAVER

by Donet Meynell Clayton

Beside his loom sits Lung Su Lung, the Wise,
The master craftsman of an old regime;
His amber face bent low and olive eyes
Smiling their ageless smile, spinning
Tragedy with slow and slender hands . . .
While war falls massively like Gulliver's boot
On flower trees and colored glass and fans.
The warp of silk shifts down like keys and mute
Is thrown shuttle on the changing woof;
Only the tramp of soldiers in the street,
Where sounded all night long under the roof
Of stars the pad-padding of the rickshaw's feet.
Su Lung will die, but tapestry and lace
Record the wounded memory of the race.

A FEW MILES SOUTH OF NOWHERE

by James A. Ritchie

After a long pull on my canteen, I eased my horse down the steep sides of the gully, followed it a quarter-mile, then came out along the dry bed of a stream that flowed hard in the spring and not at all the rest of the year.

I'd been wanting to run my metal detector along that streambed since I first found it four months earlier, but this was the first chance I'd had. I started to climb out of the saddle when the sound of a car horn came to my ears.

It was some distance away, but I stayed in the saddle and started toward the sound, thinking some prospector or rancher had run into trouble, probably broken down, and needed help.

Out in that part of New Mexico, folks were few and far between. You could die waiting for help, so I rode over to see what I could do, as any man would.

I came over a rise, around a bend of rock, and stopped my horse dead still. For a minute I sat there staring, thinking surely the sun had rattled my sanity. I'd expected to see a Jeep or a pickup truck, and I did. A nearly new Ford pickup truck. The hood of the truck was raised, a sure sign that something was wrong.

It wasn't the sight of the truck that made me doubt my sanity,

"'A Few Miles South of Nowhere' isn't like any of the stories you've bought from me in the past," said author James Ritchie in his letter to *EQMM*. "But doggone it, I like it." We do, too, so we're offering it to readers this month as an unusual blend of mystery, adventure, and ghost story. The author, like the narrator in the story, is a resident of New Castle, Indiana. †

but the woman standing next to it. As I watched, she reached through the window and honked the horn three times.

You have to understand, there wasn't a road of any kind for fifteen miles, and that little more than a dirt strip. And there was nothing out there anyone could want, except some fool like me looking for gold nuggets, or some rancher maybe looking for lost cattle.

But what in God's name had made a lone woman decide to come into such a country?

Whatever her reasons, she was broken down in a place that kills fast, so I rode on toward her to see if I could get her out of her trouble.

Maybe it would help to know a little more about that country, and how I came to live out there in the first place.

I live now in a pleasant little Midwestern town called New Castle. It's located in east-central Indiana, only a few miles from where I grew up. With a population of fifteen thousand, New Castle's a slow town, almost a still-life kind of place.

There's little crime, plenty of beautiful countryside to see for the effort of a ten-minute drive, and knowing your neighbors comes without effort. I like it here. With luck, I'll grow old and die here.

But like most, I haven't always lived here. When I hit eighteen years of age, the urge to travel hit me. I wanted to see more of the country, and for a couple of years I did just that. Using my thumb for a guide, I followed the wind, not caring which way it blew.

After about three years of this wanderlust, I began looking for a place to stop and put down . . . I almost said roots, but that's too permanent a word for what I wanted. I wanted to stop for a while, yes. Maybe even stop forever, if I could find the right spot. But I didn't want roots so deep they couldn't be pulled up if and when the free wind called again.

With this in mind, I wandered another year, going back to areas I'd liked, hitchhiking through new ones. Montana caught my interest, then Wyoming, and then Oregon. But in my travels I'd gone through the deserts of the Southwest three times, and now they called to me.

The desert is brain-fryingly hot and bone dry in the summer, cold and barren in the winter, and ready to take a man's life on a moment's notice any time of the year. But there is also a strange kind of changing sameness to the desert, if those words make any sense.

It's beautiful, no doubt about it. A subtle beauty, maybe, except

when the spring rains turn the dull brown sameness to a sudden burst of blooming flowers. Or when the sun sets through a wind-swept dust storm and puts all the sunsets you've ever seen to shame. But a real, tangible beauty, nonetheless.

I found the place I wanted not far from the Sacramento Mountains in New Mexico.

You don't put much money aside thumbing around the country working odd jobs. But I had enough to buy an old prospector's shack and an even older pickup truck. The cost of both was under a thousand dollars and still left me without two pennies to rub together.

But I found work here and there. Enough to get by on, and with my meager needs, even enough to put back a few dollars each week. Before long I owned a horse, a dog, and many of the doodads you accumulate as soon as you settle down.

Even after all these years, I can close my eyes and see that country. Roswell was forty miles or so north and a bit west. The Pecos River was about the same distance due east, while the Mescalero Apache Reservation was twenty miles or so to the west. As they say out there, it was a little south of nowhere, a little north of hell.

Wild and lonesome and beautiful. Neighbors take on a whole new meaning in country like that. You may live forty miles from the nearest person but they are still your neighbor, and still treat you as such.

I had few visitors. An old man named Josh Willingham, who'd been prospecting all over the Southwest since God grew the mountains, and a man named Beaton Johnson, who ranched a few miles to the east, both stopped by now and then. That was about it.

But once a month I went into Roswell to buy food and truck home drinking water. Usually I'd make a night of it, drinking beer and learning to use my voice again. Then I'd sleep in my truck and drive home the next day.

It may sound a useless life to many, but I enjoyed it. Over time, I came to know every prospector and rancher within a few hundred square miles; I learned to earn minimum wage or better by riding, driving, and walking all over hell and gone looking for gold.

You don't find much, but with patience, luck, and a good metal detector, you can keep beans in your belly and clothes on your back. At roughly four hundred dollars an ounce, a little bit of gold goes a long way.

Which is good, because that's all there is. A little bit of gold. A

little nugget here, another one ten miles away, and fifty prospectors looking for each. But you keep looking because you don't need much money, and there's always the dream of striking it rich.

At least, that's why most keep looking. Striking it rich was the last thing I wanted. I hunted the desert for gold because I loved the desert, and because earning a bit of money out there on my own was better than stringing fence or shoveling out horse stalls for somebody else.

So that's how I came to be out in the middle of nowhere, riding toward a blonde who from a distance looked prettier than an October sunset. She looked even better up close. She smiled when I rode up.

"You look to be having trouble," I said. "Can I help?"

She smiled wider. "I hope so. I was just driving along, and then my truck overheated. Now the radiator is empty."

Climbing down, I looped the reins around a nearby bit of brush and walked over to the truck. It didn't take long to find the problem. The fan belt had broken. Bad enough, but the lower radiator hose was ruptured, probably from the pressure of the steam.

The rupture wasn't a bad one, and I could fix it with duct tape, if I had any. The fan belt was another story. Without a new one, that truck wasn't going anywhere. I told her as much.

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

"That depends. You don't happen to have a spare fan belt and a roll of duct tape, do you?"

She thought a minute. "I don't think so. No, I'm sure of it. There's nothing in the back except . . . no, I'm sure."

"Ma'am, out here you don't go anywhere without a spare belt or two. Fact is, most keep enough spare parts to fix just about anything that can go wrong."

She nodded her head. "I know. My husband always carries such things. Come to think of it, there was a large tool chest in the back. My husband took it out to work on our Jeep. I guess he forgot to put it back."

That was exactly the kind of thing that got fools into trouble, but I didn't say it. "Do you mind if I check the truck? There might be an emergency kit you don't know about."

Again, I could see her thinking. "I guess it wouldn't hurt anything."

I checked inside the cab, came up empty. There was nothing in the bed except what appeared to be two large crates. Both were

covered by a tarp. "What's under there?"

She hesitated before answering, and I knew she didn't trust me. Well, there was no reason she should. She'd never seen me before, and it was likely we were a lot of miles from the nearest person.

"Ore samples," she said at last. "I was taking them into town to have them tested."

That was the right answer. "Then your husband is still out here?"

I could almost see the snap of a decision in her eyes, and her whole attitude changed. It was as if she'd made up her mind about something. "Yes, he has a camp about ten miles from here," she said. She pointed. "Over that way. There's a Jeep in camp, and I'm sure plenty of spare parts to repair the truck."

"I thought about trying to walk back there, but it's so hot, and all I have is a sip or two of water."

"Staying here was the right thing," I said. "You'd never have made that walk without water."

In truth, she might have, but it would have been a terrible risk. I thought a long minute. "Ma'am, your camp seems to be our only bet. Anywhere else is a three-day ride, going double."

I looked up at the sun, checked it against my watch. "I think we can reach your camp well before dark, if it's no farther than you say."

"I hate to leave the pickup."

I shrugged. "You could stay here, if you like. I can follow your tracks back to your camp and tell your husband what happened. It would be quicker, at that."

"No! I mean, I'd better go along. I don't suppose anyone will bother the truck while I'm gone."

"It'll be fine, ma'am."

"All right, then. And by the way, my name is Jeanene Harper."

"I'm Sean O'Donnell. Glad to meet you."

"How do we do this?" she asked. "I've never ridden a horse."

"Nothing to it."

I climbed into the saddle, slipped my foot from the stirrup, and showed her how to put hers in. Then I took her hand and helped her up behind me.

She was wearing a long-sleeved white shirt, tan jeans, and leather boots, and she was all woman. She put her arms around my waist, leaned against my back. There wasn't any real need to hold on like that, but I wasn't about to say so. The ten miles to her camp were pleasant.

Until I realized where we were. Right on the southern edge of the Mescalero Apache Reservation, butted up against the Sacramento Mountains. A lot of men hunted gold in the mountains surrounding the reservation, and one and all, they were looking for the same thing.

Apache gold. Everyone in those parts knew the story. It was said that somewhere in those mountains the Apaches had the richest gold mine conceivable. But it was sacred to them, and the legend said it was guarded by the ghosts of their ancestors.

Like most legends, it probably had a basis in fact. Back a hundred years ago, the Apaches had traded gold for rifles, and once, nearly as long ago, a man wandered out of those mountains and died on the desert. He was never identified, but his pockets were said to have been filled with gold nuggets so rich that the few in his pocket were worth over two thousand dollars. And that was back when gold was thirty-two dollars an ounce.

I doubted even that story, but one thing was certain: At least a dozen men had gone into those mountains searching for gold . . . and had never been seen again.

I didn't think much of that, either. In four years, I'd seen more than one fool head into those mountains. Usually they were city people who didn't know desert from dessert. People like that go wandering about the mountains, and they're asking for trouble. They break a leg, or run out of water, or get bitten by a rattler, and that's it.

The camp was well set up. A large canvas tent, and a smaller nylon tent not far away. All the right equipment, and everything in its place. But no people.

"My husband said he was going back out in the mountains," Jeanene said. "Sometimes they stay. gone for days."

"They?"

"Yes. We have a guide. His name is Sam Collins."

That settled it. I'd met Sam Collins half a dozen times. Everyone in the area knew him, in fact. Sam was what might be termed a local "character." He'd been searching for the Lost Apache Gold half his life.

Sam would stay out in the mountains until he was broke, then come into town to work if he had to, though he preferred to find some fool willing to stake him against a share in any profits. Just like these folks.

"Do you think you can find what we need?" Jeanene asked.

"I'll try."

It didn't take long. Sam was an old hand in the desert, and he'd made certain they had everything a man could possibly need, and more. It didn't take long to find a spare fan belt, a roll of duct tape, and the tools I needed.

There was something wrong with the camp. Just a feeling, really. The Jeep was there, but the men were gone. The coals of the fire were still hot, and coffee simmered over it.

"How do they go into the mountains?"

"They walk," she said. "It takes most of the day, but you can't get a Jeep in where they are, and we don't have horses."

I nodded. "All right to get a cup of that coffee?"

"Help yourself."

I did. It was strong. Too strong. The pot was half empty, but it was like it had boiled away, rather than been drunk. Still, with a bit of water added, it was fine.

Getting back to her pickup while carrying her and the tools was a problem. The only way I could see to do it was to leave my horse at the camp and take the Jeep. Then I could drive it back and pick up my horse once her truck was working.

"It makes sense," she said. Unsaddling my horse, I hobbled him so he could graze, but not run away. Then we loaded the Jeep. Jeanene fumbled around on her key ring, found the right key, started the Jeep. It didn't take long to reach her truck. Replacing the fan belt, temporarily patching the hose, and refilling the radiator took no more than half an hour.

Jeanene started the truck, then turned off the engine.

"Have that hose replaced as soon as you reach town," I said. "That patch won't last long."

She took the key to the Jeep off the key ring and handed it to me. Then she smiled. "Can I trust you to take the Jeep back to camp?"

"Yes. But you can follow me, if you like."

"I don't think that will be necessary," she said. "But you'd better get started. It's going to be dark soon."

"Yes, ma'am. I mean, Jeanene. You drive careful. Can you find the road from here?"

"Due north, isn't it?"

"That's right."

I turned and started for the Jeep. I hadn't taken more than five or six steps when she shot me. I'm not sure I heard the sound of the first shot, but I felt the thunderclap of the bullet striking me

in the head. As I was falling, I did hear the second shot, and felt the hot burn along my ribs. Then there was only darkness.

When next I opened my eyes, it was dark. I tried to roll over, couldn't. Something seemed to be holding my body down. Memories came rushing back and I swore. Then I passed out again.

The next time I came out of it, the sun was up, and my head seemed clearer. Rolling as much as possible, I realized I was lying at the bottom of a gully, and what seemed like a ton of dirt had been caved in on me. It was pure chance that my head and one arm remained free.

I'd been shot. How seriously, I didn't know, but my head throbbed with pain, and it hurt to breathe. With effort, I moved my arm, touched my head. There was a deep groove where a bullet had cut along my skull. The wound was caked with dirt and blood, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped.

It took nearly two hours to dig myself free, and another hour to struggle up out of the gully. I was weak, thirsty, dizzy, and just plain sick from the exertion. But at last I made it out of the gully. The Jeep was nearby, right where I'd parked it, but Jeanene was taking no chances. The hood was up, and the distributor cap was gone.

In case anyone finds it, I thought. It'll look like someone broke down and took the distributor cap to have it fixed. Smart. Real smart.

I was in real trouble, and I knew it. Then it came to me. I struggled to the Jeep, looked inside. My canteen was there next to the seat. It was still half full. Greedily, I drank deeply.

In the mirror on the Jeep, I looked at myself. My whole head was a bloody mess. No wonder Jeanene had thought I was dead. But I wasn't dead. Not yet. Though my options were certainly limited.

The camp. I had to make it back there. Whatever else was there, I knew I'd find food, shelter, and my horse. If I could make it. Ten miles on foot in my condition was asking a lot.

Using a blanket from the back of the Jeep, I bandaged my wounds as best I could, then started walking. There's no point in going into detail about the walk. Let's just say I fell a few hundred times, but managed to get to my feet again each time. And in the end, I reached the camp.

There was food there, and water. I ate, drank, bathed my wounds. Then slept the night through. The next morning I hurt all over, and I was stiff as a board, but knew I'd live.

It was then I saw the buzzards. They were circling only a few hundred yards to the south. Still a bit unsteady, I walked that way. I saw exactly what the buzzards did. Two bodies, both men. They'd been hastily covered with dirt and rocks, but coyotes had pulled them free. They weren't a pretty sight.

One of them was Sam Collins. He'd been shot twice in the back. Covering their bodies with enough rocks to keep the coyotes and buzzards away, I walked back to camp.

I rested and took care of myself the rest of the day, slept again. Early the next morning I loaded my saddlebags with food, filled my canteen, and rode away. I was still hurting, still dizzy, so I rode to the closest place I knew. Beaton Johnson's ranch.

It was still a two-day ride, but when I reached it, he didn't ask a lot of foolish questions. He drove me into town, and before you knew it, I was in a hospital. And telling my story to half a dozen men wearing badges, Sheriff Bridges being the main one.

I wasn't sure they believed my story, but they believed my bullet wounds. They promised to look into it. They did. Forty-eight hours later Sheriff Bridges and a big deputy were back in my room.

"It was just as you described it," Sheriff Bridges said. "Right down to the last detail."

"What about the woman, Jeanene Harper? Any sign of her?"

A funny look crossed his face. "We found the tracks of her truck and followed them. The truck had a flat tire about five miles from where she shot you.

"We found her three hundred yards farther on. She was dead."

"Dead? How?"

He looked at the deputy, then at me. "She was trampled to death. Wild horses, I guess. At least, they hadn't been shod."

He opened his mouth to say something else, clamped it shut, turned around, and left my room without saying anything more. The deputy started to follow him. "Wait a minute," I said. "That doesn't make any sense. Wild horses don't usually attack people. What isn't he telling me?"

The deputy looked at the door, then at me. "I guess you have a right to know," he said. "She was trampled to death. But there were no tracks of horses leading up to the spot where she was killed, and none leading away. It was like, hell, I don't know. Like they materialized right there, killed her, then vanished."

A shiver went through me. "Ghosts," I said. "They say the gold is guarded by ghosts."

He wet his lips. "Usually I'd say that was fool talk. But there's something else. The flat tire . . ."

"What about it?"

"There was a big hole in the side of the tire. Sheriff Bridges cut the hole wider. Ah, hell, he found an arrowhead inside. An old flint arrowhead.

"It was just like somebody had shot an arrow into the tire, but when they pulled it out, the arrowhead came loose."

"What about the gold ore? She said the crates in the truck were loaded with ore."

"They were empty," he said. "Broke open and empty."

He walked out of my room just as Sheriff Bridges had done.

When I was back on my feet and was feeling halfway healthy, my curiosity got the better of me. I rode back out to where the camp had been. Everything was gone except for the ring of rocks where the campfire had been.

I made camp, wandered around a bit, found nothing. On the third day I was about to leave but gave the area one last going-over. It was then that I found it.

The camp had been trampled pretty good, but out away from it I could still sort out the tracks. It wasn't hard to tell which belonged to Sam Collins . . . his boots were old and so down at the heel you couldn't miss their print.

A hundred yards west of the camp I saw one of his boot prints back under a bit of brush, though the trail leading to it had been carefully erased away. Kneeling down, I looked under the brush.

There appeared to be a natural hollow in the rock behind the brush, with another slab of rock propped up to cover it. Moving the slab aside, I saw a big leather pouch, one I'd seen half a dozen times before.

Sam Collins always carried that pouch with him. Whenever he'd find a nugget, he'd drop it in the pouch, then show it off at the bar in town before selling it. The pouch was a big one, and it wasn't empty. It was swelled to the bursting point.

Pulling it from the hollow, I lifted it. It was heavy. God Almighty heavy. Gold heavy. My heart beating wildly, I opened it.

The sun hit the contents, and the gleam of gold made my mouth drop open. I poured the nuggets onto the ground, and they glittered like the streets of Heaven.

Some of the nuggets had a bit of quartz clinging to them. One was at least half quartz. But most were jewelry gold, the kind a

man spends his life looking for, but never really expects to find. I sat there looking at them for a long, long time.

Sam Collins had found the Lost Apache Gold. That was the only explanation. He'd squirreled this away for himself, cached it here. Then had been killed before he could retrieve it.

Thoughts swirled through my mind. That pouch held how much gold? It was hard to judge. But at least fifteen or twenty ounces, even after the quartz was chipped away. Maybe more. Seven or eight thousand dollars' worth, easy. Maybe as much as ten thousand.

Then how much had been packed away in those two big crates on the back of Jeanene Harper's pickup truck? There was no way to tell. Millions, probably. Enough to kill three men for. Or any number of men.

And somewhere, within a day's walk, was the mine where all that gold came from. A day's walk covers a lot of territory. But I could find it. Probably. Almost certainly, given enough time.

But did I want to? I thought of all the men who'd vanished in those mountains, and of how Jeanene Harper had died. The gold was guarded by ghosts, they said. The ghosts of ancient Apaches.

It was a hot day, somewhere near a hundred degrees, maybe a bit over. Hot and still and quiet, as desert days often are. But as I picked up the gold to refill the pouch, a cold wind suddenly whipped at my hair.

The shiver that ran down my spine had nothing to do with the cold wind. For a minute I kneeled there, not really thinking anything. Then, hoping whatever ghosts there were would forgive me, I took one nugget and slipped it into my pocket.

The others I put back in the pouch, and put the pouch back in its hiding place. For all I know, it remains there still.

I stayed in my shack another year, but the temptation of all that gold was too strong. I moved away, not only from the desert, but from the Southwest. Three years later, I settled here, back near where my wanderlust first began. And here I'll stay.

I still have the single gold nugget I kept for myself. It's the size of a big walnut, pure except for one tiny vein of quartz that only adds to its beauty. On a scale, it weighs in at three ounces.

But I've never tried to sell it, and never will. I take it out and admire it often, and each time I do I can see Jeanene Harper in my mind, and again feel the touch of that sudden gust of cold wind out in that oven of a desert. ●



THE SERPENT'S BACK

by Ian Rankin

This was, mind you, back in 1793 or '94. Edinburgh was a better place then. Nothing ever happens here now, but back then . . . back then *everything* was happening.

Back then a caddie was indispensable if you happened to be visiting the town. If you wanted someone found, if a message needed delivering, if you wanted a bed for the night, fresh oysters, a shirt-maker, or the local hoor, you came to a caddie. And if the claret got the better of you, a caddie would see you safely home.

See, the town wasn't safe, Lord no. The streets were mean. The hifalutin' were leaving the old town and crossing the Nor' Loch to the New. They lived in Princes Street and George Street, or did until they could no longer stand the stench. The old loch was an open sewer by that time, and the old town not much better.

I was called Cullender, Cully to my friends. No one knew my first name. They need only say "Cullender" and they'd be pointed

in my direction. That's how it was with young Master Gisborne. He had newly arrived by coach from London, and feared he'd never sit down again. . . .

"Are you Cullender? My good friend Mr. Wilks told me to ask for you."

"Wilks?"

"He was here for some weeks. A medical student."

I nodded. "I recall the young gentleman particularly," I lied.

"I shall require a clean room, nothing too fancy. My pockets aren't bottomless."

"How long will you be staying, Master?"

He looked around. "I'm not sure. I'm considering a career in medicine. If I like the faculty, I may enroll."

And he fingered the edges of his coat. It was a pale blue coat with bright silver buttons. Like Master Gisborne, it was overdone and didn't quite fit together. His face was fat like a whelp's, but his physique was lean and his eyes shone. His skin had suffered neither disease nor malnourishment. He was, I suppose, a fine enough specimen, but I'd seen fine specimens before. Many of them stayed, seduced by Edinburgh. I saw them daily in the pungent howffs, or slouching through the narrow closes, heads bowed. None of them looked so fresh these days. Had they been eels, the fishwives would have tossed them in a bucket and sold them to only the most gullible.

The most gullible, of course, being those newly arrived in the city.

Master Gisborne would need looking after. He was haughty on the surface, cocksure, but I knew he was troubled, wondering how long he could sustain the act of worldliness. He had money but not in limitless supply. His parents would be professional folk, not gentry. Some denizens would gull him before supper. Me? I was undecided.

Described by its author as "a black comedy set in 1790s Edinburgh," "The Serpent's Back" has already been produced as a ninety-minute radio play for the BBC in Britain. The play proved such a success that the BBC has commissioned three further scripts featuring "Cully the Caddie," the ingenious sleuth who makes his debut in this truly puzzling whodunit. ¶

I picked up his trunk. "Shall I call a chair?" He frowned. "The streets here are too narrow and steep for coaches. Haven't you noticed? Know why they're narrow?" I sidled up to him. "There's a serpent buried beneath." He looked ill at ease so I laughed. "Just a story, Master. We use chairmen instead of horses. Good strong Highland stock."

I knew he had already walked a good way in search of me, hauling his trunk with him. He was tired, but counting his money too.

"Let's walk," he decided, "and you can acquaint me with the town."

"The town, Master," I said, "will acquaint you with itself."

We got him settled in at Lucky Seaton's. Lucky had been a hooer herself at one time, then had been turned to the Moderate movement and now ran a Christian rooming house.

"We know all about medical students, don't we, Cully?" she said, while Gisborne took the measure of his room. "The worst sinners in Christendom."

She patted Master Gisborne on his plump cheek, and I led him back down the treacherous stairwell.

"What did she mean?" he asked me.

"Visit a few howffs and you'll find out," I told him. "The medical students are the most notorious group of toppers in the city, if you discount the lawyers, judges, poets, boatmen, and Lords this-and-that."

"What's a howff?"

I led him directly into one.

There was a general fug in what passed for the air. Pipes were being smoked furiously, and there were no windows to open, so the stale fumes lay heavy at eye level. I could hear laughter and swearing and the shrieks of women, but it was like peering through a haar. I saw one-legged Jack, balancing a wench on his good knee. Two lawyers sat at the next table along, heads close together. A poet of minor repute scribbled away as he sat slumped on the floor. And all around there was wine, wine in jugs and bumpers and bottles, its sour smell vying with that of tobacco.

But the most noise came from a big round table in the furthest corner, where beneath flickering lamplight a meeting of the Monthly Club was underway. I led Gisborne to the table, having promised him that Edinburgh would acquaint itself with him.

Five gentlemen sat round the table. One recognised me immediately.

"Dear old Cully! What news from the world above?"

"No news, sir."

"None better than that!"

"What's the meeting this month, sirs?"

"The Hot Air Club, Cully." The speaker made a toast of the words. "We are celebrating the tenth anniversary of Mr. Tytler's flight by montgolfier over this very city."

This had to be toasted again, while I explained to Master Gisborne that the Monthly Club changed its name regularly in order to have something to celebrate.

"I see you've brought fresh blood, Cully."

"Mr. Gisborne," I said, "is newly arrived from London and hopes to study medicine."

"I hope he will, too, if he intends to practise."

There was laughter and replenishing of glasses.

"This gentleman," I informed my master, "is Mr. Walter Scott. Mr. Scott is an advocate."

"Not today," said another of the group. "Today he's Colonel Grogg!"

More laughter. Gisborne was asked what he would drink.

"A glass of port," my hapless charge replied.

The table went quiet. Scott was smiling with half his mouth only.

"Port is not much drunk in these parts. It reminds some people of the Union. Some people would rather drink *whisky* and toast their Jacobite 'King O'er the Water.'" Someone at the table actually did this, not heeding the tone of Scott's voice. "But we're one nation now," Scott continued. That man did like to make a speech. "And if you'll drink some claret with us, we may yet be reconciled."

The drinker toasted Bonnie Prince Charlie; another lawyer, whose name was Urquhart, now turned to Gisborne with his usual complaint to Englishmen. "'Rule Britannia,'" he said, "was written by a Scot. John Bull was *invented* by a Scot!"

He slumped back, having to his mind made his point. Master Gisborne looked like he had tumbled into Bedlam.

"Now, now," Scott calmed. "We're here to celebrate montgolfiers." He handed Gisborne a stemless glass filled to the brim. "And new arrivals. But you've come to a dangerous place, sir."

"How so?" my master enquired.

"Sedition is rife." Scott paused. "As is murder. How many is it now, Cully?"

"Three this past fortnight." I recited the names. "Dr. Benson, MacStay the coffin maker, and a wretch called Howison."

"All stabbed," Scott informed Gisborne. "Imagine, murdering a coffin maker! It's like trying to murder Death himself."

As was wont to happen, the Monthly Club shifted to another howff to partake of a *prix fixe* dinner, and thence to another, where Scott would drink champagne and lead a discussion of "the chest."

The chest in question had been found when the Castle's crown room was opened during a search for some documents. The crown room had been opened, according to the advocate, by special warrant under the royal sign manual. No one had authority to break open the chest. The crown room was locked again, and the chest still inside. At the time of the union with England, the royal regalia of Scotland had disappeared. It was Scott's contention that this regalia—crown, sceptre, and sword—lay in the chest.

Gisborne listened in fascination. Somewhere along the route he had misplaced his sense of economy. He would pay for the champagne. He would pay for dinner. A brothel was being discussed as the next destination. . . . Luckily, Scott was taking an interest in him, so that Gisborne's pockets were still fairly full, though his wits be empty.

I sat apart, conversing with the exiled Comte d'Artois, who had fled France at the outset of revolution. He retained the habit of stroking his neck for luck, his good fortune being that it still connected his head to his trunk. He had reason to feel nervous. Prompted by events in France, sedition was in the air. There had been riots, and now the ringleaders were being tried.

We were discussing Deacon Brodie, hanged six years before for a series of housebreakings. Brodie, a cabinetmaker and locksmith, had robbed the very premises to which he'd fitted locks. Respectable by day, he'd been nefarious by night. To the Comte (who knew about such matters), this was merely "the human condition."

I noticed suddenly that I was seated in shadow. A man stood over me. He had full thick lips, a meaty stew of a nose, and eyebrows which met at the central divide the way warring forces sometimes will.

"Cullender?"

I shook my head and turned away.

"You're Cullender," he said. "This is for you." He slapped his paw onto the table, then turned and pushed back through the throng. A piece of paper, neatly folded, sat on the wood where his hand had been. I unfolded it and read:

"Outside the Tolbooth, quarter before midnight."

The note was unsigned. I handed it to the Comte.

"You will go?"

It was already past eleven. "I'll let one more drink decide."

The Tolbooth was the city jail where Brodie himself had spent his final days, singing airs from *The Beggar's Opera*. The night was like pitch, nobody having bothered to light their lamps, and a haar rolled through from the direction of Leith.

In the darkness, I had trodden in something I did not care to study and was scraping my shoe clean on the Tolbooth's corner-stone when I heard a voice close by.

"Cullender?"

A woman's voice. Even held to a whisper, I knew it for that. The lady herself was dressed top to toe in black, her face deep inside the hood of a cloak.

"I'm Cullender."

"I'm told you perform services."

"I'm no minister, lady."

Maybe she smiled. A small bag appeared and I took it, weighing the coins inside.

"There's a book circulating in the town," said my new mistress. "I am keen to obtain it."

"We have several fine booksellers in the Luckenbooths. . . ."

"You are glib, sir."

"And you are mysterious."

"Then I'll be plain. I know of only one copy of this book, a private printing. It is called *Ranger's Second Impartial List* . . ."

"... of the *Ladies of Pleasure in Edinburgh*."

"You know it. Have you seen it?"

"It's not meant for the likes of me."

"I would like to see this book."

"You want me to find it?"

"It's said you know everyone in the city."

"Everyone that matters."

"Then you can locate it."

"It's possible." I examined my shoes. "But first I'd need to know a little more. . . ."

When I looked up again, she was gone.

At The Cross, the caddies were speaking quietly with the chairmen. We caddies had organised ourselves into a company, boasting written standards and a Magistrate of Caddies in charge of all. We regarded ourselves superior to the chairmen, mere brawny Highland migrants.

But my best friend and most trusted ally, Mr. Mack, was a chairman. He was not, however, at The Cross. Work was nearly over for the night. The last taverns were throwing out the last soused customers. Only the brothels and cockpits were still active. Not able to locate Mr. Mack, I turned instead to a fellow caddie, an old hand called Dryden.

"Mr. Dryden?" I said, all businesslike, "I require your services, the fee to be agreed between us."

Dryden, as ever, was willing. I knew he would work through the night. He was known to the various brothelkeepers and could ask his questions discreetly, as I might have done myself had the lady's fee not been sufficient to turn me employer.

Me, I headed home, climbing the lonely stairs to my attic quarters and a cold mattress. I found sleep the way a pickpocket finds his gull.

Which is to say easily.

Next morning, Dryden was dead.

A young caddie called Colin came to tell me. We repaired to the Nor' Loch, where the body still lay, facedown in the slime. The Town Guard—"Town Rats" behind their backs—fingered their Lochaber axes, straightened their tall cocked hats, and tried to look important. One of their number, a red-faced individual named Fairlie, asked if we knew the victim.

"Dryden," I said. "He was a caddie."

"He's been run through with a dagger," Fairlie delighted in telling me. "Just like those other three."

But I wasn't so sure about that. . . .

I went to a quiet howff, a drink steadying my humour. Dryden, I surmised, had been killed in such a way as to make him appear another victim of the city's stabber. I knew, though, that in all

likelihood he had been killed because of the questions he'd been asking . . . questions *I'd* sent him to ask. Was I safe myself? Had Dryden revealed anything to his killer? And what was it about my mistress's mission that made it so deadly dangerous?

As I was thus musing, young Gisborne entered the bar on fragile legs.

"Did I have anything to drink last evening?" he asked, holding his head.

"Master, you drank as if it were our last day alive."

Our hostess was already replenishing my wine jug. "Kill or cure," I said, pouring two glasses.

Gisborne could see I was worried and asked the nature of the problem. I was grateful to tell him. Any listener would have sufficed. Mind, I held back some. This knowledge was proving dangerous, so I made no mention of the lady and her book. I jumped from the messenger to my words with Dryden.

"The thing to do, then," my young master said, "is to track backwards. Locate the messenger."

I thought back to the previous evening. About the time the messenger had been arriving, the lawyer Urquhart had been taking his leave of the Monthly Club.

"We'll talk to Urquhart," I said. "At this hour he'll be in his chambers. Follow me."

Gisborne followed me out of the howff and across the street directly into another. There, in a booth, papers before him and a bottle of wine beside them, sat Urquhart.

"I'm pleased to see you," the lawyer announced. His eyes were bloodshot, his nose like a stoned cherry. His breath I avoided altogether. Aged somewhere in his thirties, Urquhart was a seasoned dissolute. He would have us take a bumper with him.

"Sir," I began, "do you recall leaving the company last night?"

"Of course. I'm only sorry I'd to leave so early. An assignation, you understand." We shared a smile at this. "Tell me, Gisborne, to which house of ill fame did the gang repair?"

"I don't recollect," Gisborne admitted.

Urquhart enjoyed this. "Then tell me, did you awake in a bed or the gutter?"

"In neither, Mr. Urquhart. I awoke on the kitchen floor of a house I did not know."

While Urquhart relished this, I asked if he'd taken a chair from the tavern last night.

"Of course. A friend of yours was front-runner."

"Mr. Mack?" Urquhart nodded. "You didn't happen to see a grotesque, sir?" I described the messenger to him. Urquhart shook his head.

"I hear a caddie was murdered last night," Urquhart said. "We all know the Town Rats can't be expected to bring anyone to justice." He leaned toward me confidentially. "Are you looking for justice, Cully?"

"I don't know what I'm looking for, sir."

Which was a lie. For now, I was looking for Mr. Mack.

I left Gisborne with Urquhart, and found Mack at The Cross.

"Yes," he said, "I saw that fellow going in. A big fat-lipped sort with eyebrows that met in the middle."

"Had you seen him before?"

Mack nodded. "But not here, over the loch."

"The new town." Mack nodded. "Then show me where."

Mack and his fellow chairman carried me down the steep slope towards the building site. Yes, building site. For though Princes Street and George Street were finished, yet more streets were being artfully constructed. Just now, the builders were busy on what would be called Charlotte Square. We took the simpler route, down past Trinity Hospital and the College Kirk, then along Princes Street itself. There were plans to turn the Nor' Loch into either a canal or formal gardens, but for the moment it was a dumping ground. I avoided looking at it and tried not to think of poor Dryden. Joining the loch to the old town sat The Mound, an apt name for a treacherous heap of new-town rubble.

"All change, eh, Cully?" Mr. Mack called to me. "Soon there'll be no business in the old town for the likes of you and me."

He had a point. The nobility had already deserted the old town. Their grand lands now housed wheelwrights and hosiers and schoolmasters. They all lived in the new town now, at a general distance from the milling rabble. So here the foundations were being laid not for the new town alone but for the death of the old.

We passed into George Street and the sedan chair was brought to rest. "It was here I saw him," Mr. Mack said. "He was marching up the street like he owned the place."

I got out of the chair and rubbed my bruised posterior. Mr. Mack's companion had already spotted another likely fare. I waved them off. I must needs talk to my mistress, and that meant

finding her servant. So I sat on a step and watched the work carts grinding past overloaded with rocks and rubble. The day passed pleasantly enough.

Perhaps two hours had passed when I saw him. I couldn't be sure which house he emerged from; he was some way along the street. I tucked myself behind some railings and watched him head down towards Princes Street. I followed at a canny distance.

He was clumsy, his gait gangling, and I followed him with ease. He climbed back up to the old town and made for the Lucken-booths. Here he entered a bookshop, causing me to pause.

The shop belonged to a Mr. Whitewood, who fancied himself not only bookseller but poet and author also. I entered the premises quietly and could hear Whitewood's raised voice. He was towards the back of his shop, reciting to a fawning audience of other *soi-disant* writers and people to whom books were mere fashion.

The servant was pushing his way to the front of the small gathering. Whitewood stood on a low unsteady podium, and read with a white handkerchief in one hand, which he waved for dramatic effect. He needed all the help he could get. I dealt daily with the "improvers," the self-termed "literati." I'll tell you now what an improver is, he's an imp who roves. I'd seen them dragging their carcasses through the gutter and waylaying hoors and scrapping with the tourists.

The servant had reached the podium, and the bookseller had seen him. Without pausing mid-stanza, Whitewood passed the wretch a note. It was done in an instant and the servant headed back towards the door. I slipped outside and hid myself, watching the servant head as if towards the courts.

I followed him into the courthouse. I followed him into one particular court . . . and there was brought up short.

Lord Braxfield, the Hanging Judge, was deciding a case. He sat in his wig at his muckle bench and dipped oatcakes into his claret, sucking loudly on the biscuits as he glared at the accused. There were three of them, and I knew they were charged with sedition, being leaders of a popular convention for parliamentary reform. At this time, only thirty or so people in Edinburgh had the right to vote for the member of parliament. These three sad creatures had wanted to change that, and a lot more besides.

I glanced at the jury—doubtless hand picked by Braxfield himself. The accused would be whipped and sent to Botany Bay. The public gallery was restless. There were guards between the popu-

lace and the bench. The servant was nodded through by one of the guards and handed Whitewood's note to Braxfield. Then he turned quickly and left by another door. I was set to follow when the Hanging Judge noticed me.

"Cullender, approach the bench!"

I bit my lip, but knew better than to defy Braxfield, even if it meant losing my quarry. The guards let me through. I forbore to look at the accused as I passed them.

"Yes, my Lord?"

Braxfield nibbled another of his infernal biscuits. He looked like he'd drunk well, too. "Cullender," he said, "you're one of the least honest and civil men in this town, am I correct?"

"I have competitors, my Lord."

He guffawed, spitting crumbs from his wet lips. "But tell me this, would you have a man live who committed treason?"

I swallowed, aware of three pairs of eyes behind me. "I might ask myself about his motives, my Lord."

Braxfield leaned over the bench. He was unquestionably ugly, eyes black as night. In his seventies, he grew increasingly eccentric. He was what passed for the law in this city. "Then it's as well *I'm* wearing this wig and not you!" he screeched. He wagged a finger, the nail of which was sore in need of a trim. "You'll see Australia one day, my friend, if you're not careful. Now be gone, I've some justice to dispense."

It had been a long time since Braxfield and "justice" had been even loosely acquainted.

Outside, the servant was long gone. Cursing my luck and the law courts both, I headed down to the Canongate.

I engaged Mr. Mack's services regarding my lady's book, warning him to be extra vigilant and telling him of Dryden's demise. He suggested going to the authorities, then realised what he was saying. The law was as effectual as a scented handkerchief against the pox, and we both knew it.

I sat in a howff and ate a dish of oysters. Having been to look at the university, Master Gisborne joined me.

"It'll be fine when it's finished," was his opinion.

I supped the last of the juice and put down the platter. "Remember I told you about the serpent, Master?"

His eyes were red-rimmed, face puffy with excess. He nodded.

"Well," I continued thoughtfully, "perhaps it's not so far beneath

the surface as I thought. You need only scratch and you'll see it. Remember that, even in your cups."

He looked puzzled, but nodded again. Then he seemed to remember something, and reached into his leather bag. He handed me a wrapped parcel.

"Cully, can you keep this somewhere safe?"

"What is it?"

"Just hold it for me for a day or so. Will you do that?"

I nodded and placed the parcel at my feet. Gisborne looked mightily relieved. Then the howff door swung inwards and Urquhart and others appeared, taking Gisborne off with them. I finished my wine and made my way back to my room.

Halfway there, I met the tailor whose family lived two floors below me.

"Cully," he said, "men are looking for you."

"What sort of men?"

"The sort you wouldn't have find you. They're standing guard on the stairwell and won't shift."

"Thanks for the warning."

He held my arm. "Cully, business is slow. If you could persuade some of your clients of the quality of my cloth . . . ?"

"Depend on it." I went back up the brae to The Cross and found Mr. Mack.

"Here," I said, handing him the parcel. "Keep this for me."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I think I may have stepped in something even less savoury than I thought. Any news of the *List*?"

Mack shook his head. He looked worried when I left him; not for himself, but for me.

I kept heading uphill, towards the Castle itself. Beneath Castle Hill lay the catacombs where the town's denizens used to hide when the place was being sacked. And here the lowest of Edinburgh's wretches still dwelt. I would be safe there, so I made my way into the tunnels and out of the light, averting my face where possible from each interested, unfriendly gaze.

The man I sought sat slouched against one of the curving walls, hands on his knees. He could sit like that for hours, brooding. He was a giant, and there were stories to equal his size. It was said he'd been a seditionary, a rabble-rouser, both pirate and smuggler. He had most certainly killed men, but these days he lay low. His name was Ormond.

He watched me sit opposite him, his gaze unblinking.

"You're in trouble," he said at last.

"Would I be here otherwise? I need somewhere to sleep for tonight."

He nodded slowly. "That's all any of us needs. You'll be safe here, Cullender."

And I was.

But next morning I was roused early by Ormond shaking me.

"Men outside," he hissed. "Looking for you."

I rubbed my eyes. "Is there another exit?"

Ormond shook his head. "If you went any deeper into this maze, you could lose yourself forever. These burrows run as far as the Canongate."

"How many men?" I was standing up now, fully awake.

"Four."

I held out my hand. "Give me a dagger; I'll deal with them." I meant it too. I was aching and irritable and tired of running. But Ormond shook his head.

"I've a better plan," he said.

He led me back through the tunnel towards its entrance. The tunnel grew more populous as we neared the outside world. I could hear my pursuers ahead, examining faces, snarling as each one proved false. Then Ormond filled his lungs.

"The price of corn's to be raised!" he bellowed. "New taxes! New laws! Everyone to The Cross!"

Voices were raised in anger, and people clambered to their feet. Ormond was raising a mob. The Edinburgh mob was a wondrous thing. It could run riot through the streets and then melt back into the shadows. There'd been the Porteous riots, anti-Catholic riots, price-rise riots, and pro-revolution riots. Each time, the vast majority escaped arrest. A mob could be raised in a minute and could disperse in another. Even Braxfield feared the mob.

Ormond was bellowing in front of me. As for me, I was merely another of the wretches. I passed the men who'd been seeking me. They stood dumbfounded in the midst of the spectacle. As soon as the crowd reached the Lawnmarket, I peeled off with a wave of thanks to Ormond, slipped into an alley, and was alone again.

But not for long. Down past the Luckenbooths I saw the servant again, and this time he would not evade me. Down towards Princes Street he went, down Geordie Boyd's footpath, a footpath

that would soon be wide enough for carriages. He crossed Princes Street and headed up to George Street. There at last I saw him descend some steps and enter a house by its servants' door. I stopped a sedan chair. Both chairmen knew me through Mr. Mack.

"That house there?" one of them said in answer to my question. "It used to belong to Lord Thorpe before he left for London. A bookseller bought it from him."

"A Mr. Whitewood?" I asked blithely. The chairmen nodded. "I admit I don't know that gentleman well. Is he married?"

"Married, aye, but you wouldn't know it. She's seldom seen, is she, Donald?"

"Rarely, very rarely," the second chairman agreed.

"Why's that? Has she the pox or something?"

They laughed at the imputation. "How would we know a thing like that?"

I laughed too, and bid them thanks and farewell. Then I approached the front door of the house and knocked a good solid knock.

The servant, when he opened the door, was liveried. He looked at me in astonishment.

"Tell your mistress I wish to speak with her," I said sharply.

He appeared in two minds at least, but I sidestepped him and found myself in a fine entrance hall.

"Wait in here," the servant growled, closing the front door and opening another. "I'll ask my Lady if she'll deign to see you."

I toured the drawing room. It was like walking around an exhibition, though in truth the only exhibition I'd ever toured was of Bedlam on a Sunday afternoon, and then only to look for a friend of mine.

The door opened and the Lady of the house swept in. She had powdered her cheeks heavily to disguise the redness there—either embarrassment or anger. Her eyes avoided mine, which gave me opportunity to study her. She was in her mid twenties, not short, and with a pleasing figure. Her lips were full and red, her eyes hard but to my mind seductive. She was a catch. But when she spoke her voice was rough-hewn, and I wondered at her history.

"What do you want?"

"What do you think I want?"

She picked up a pretty statuette. "Are we acquainted?"

"I believe so. We met outside the Tolbooth."

She attempted a disbelieving laugh. "Indeed? It's a place I've never been."

"You would not care to see its innards, Lady, yet you may if you continue in this manner."

No amount of powder could have hidden her colouring. "How dare you come here!"

"My life is in danger, Lady."

This quieted her. "Why? What have you done?"

"Nothing save what you asked of me."

"Have you found the book?"

"Not yet, and I've a mind to hand you back your money."

She saw what I was getting at, and looked aghast. "But if you're in danger . . . I swear it cannot be to do with me!"

"No? A man has died already."

"Mr. Cullender, it's only a book! It's nothing anyone would kill for."

I almost believed her. "Why do you want it?"

She turned away. "That is not your concern."

"My chief concern is my neck, Lady. I'll save it at any cost."

"I repeat, you are in no danger from seeking that book. If you think your life in peril, there must needs be some other cause." She stared at me as she spoke, and the damnation of it was that I believed her. I believed that Dryden's death, Braxfield's threat, the men chasing me, that none of it had anything to do with her. She saw the change in me and smiled a radiant smile, a smile that took me with it.

"Now get out," she said. And with that she left the room and began to climb the stairs. Her servant was waiting for me by the front door, holding it open in readiness.

My head was full of puzzles. All I knew with certainty was that I was sick of hiding. I headed back to the old town with a plan in my mind as half-baked as the scrapings the baker tossed out to the homeless.

I toured the town gossips, starting with the fishwives. Then I headed to The Cross and whispered in the ears of selected caddies and chairmen. Then it was into the howffs and dining establishments, and I was glad to wash my hard work down with a glass or two of wine.

My story broadcast, I repaired to my lodgings and lay on the straw mattress. There were no men waiting for me on the stairwell. I believe I even slept a little. It was dark when I next looked out of the skylight. The story I'd spread was that I knew who'd killed Dryden and was merely biding my time before alerting the Town Rats. Would anyone fall for the ploy? I wasn't sure. I fell to a doze again but opened my eyes on hearing noises on the stair.

The steps to my attic were rotten and had to be managed adroitly. My visitor—a lone man, I surmised—was doing his best. I sat up on the mattress and watched the door begin to open. In deep shadow, a figure entered my room, closing the door after it with some finality.

"Good evening, Cully."

I swallowed drily. "So the stories were true then, Deacon Brodie?"

"True enough," he said, coming closer. His face was almost unrecognisable, much older, more careworn, and he wore no wig, no marks of a gentleman. He carried a slender dagger in his right hand.

"I cheated the gibbet, Cully," he said with his old pride.

"But I was there, I saw you drop."

"And you saw my men cut me down and haul me away." He grinned with what teeth were left in his head. "A wooden collar saved my throat, Cully. I devised it myself."

I recalled the red silk he'd worn ostentatiously around his throat. A scarf from a female admirer, the story went. It would have hidden just such a device.

"You've been in hiding a long time," I said. The dagger was inches from me.

"I fled Edinburgh, Cully. I've been away these past five and a half years."

"What brought you back?" I couldn't take my eyes off the dagger.

"Aye," Brodie said, seeing what was in my mind. "The doctor who pronounced me dead and the coffin maker who was supposed to have buried me. I couldn't have witnesses alive . . . not now."

"And the others, Dryden and the wretch Howison?"

"Both recognised me, curse them. Then *you* started to snoop around and couldn't be found."

"But why? Why are you back?"

The dagger was touching my throat now. I'd backed myself into

a corner of the bed. There was nowhere to go. "I was *tempted* back, Cully. A temptation I could not resist. The crown jewels."

"What?"

His voice was a feverish whisper. "The chest in the crown room. I will have its contents, my last and greatest theft."

"Alone? Impossible."

"But I'm not alone. I have powerful allies." He smiled. "Braxfield, for one. He believes the theft of the jewels will spark a Scots revolution. But you know this already, Cully. You were seen watching Braxfield. You were seen in Whitewood's shop."

"Whitewood's part of it, too?"

"You know he is, romantic fool that he is." The point of the dagger broke my skin. I could feel blood trickle down my throat. If I spoke again, they would be my last words. I felt like laughing. Brodie was so wrong in his surmisings. Everything was wrong. A sudden noise on the stair turned Brodie's head. My own dagger was hidden beneath my thigh. I grabbed it with one hand, my other hand wrestling with Brodie's blade.

When Gisborne opened the door, what he saw sobered him immediately.

Brodie freed himself and turned to confront the young Englishman, dagger ready, but not ready enough. Gisborne had no hesitation in running him through. Brodie stood there frozen, then keeled over, his head hitting the boards with a dull dead sound.

Gisborne was the statue now. He stared at the spreading blood.

I got to my feet quickly. "Where did you get the blade?" I asked, amazed.

Gisborne swallowed. "I bought it new today, heeding your advice."

"You saved my life, young Master." I stared down at Brodie's corpse. "But why are you here?"

Gisborne came to his senses. "I heard you were looking for a book."

"I was. What of it?" We were both staring at Brodie.

"Only to tell you that I am in possession of it. Or I was. The lawyer Urquhart gave it to me. He said I would doubtless find it useful. . . . Who was this man?"

I ignored the question and glared at him. "*You* have the book?"

He shook his head. "I daren't keep it in my room for fear my landlady might find it."

I blinked. "That parcel?" Gisborne nodded. I felt a fool, a dumb

fool. But there was Brodie's corpse to dispose of. I could see little advantage in reporting this, his second demise, to the authorities. Questions would be asked of Master Gisborne, and a young Englishman might not always receive a fair hearing, especially with Braxfield at the bench. God no, the body must be disposed of quietly.

And I knew just the spot.

Mr. Mack helped us lug the guts down to the new town, propping Brodie in the sedan chair. The slumped corpse resembled nothing so much as a sleeping drunk.

In Charlotte Square we found some fresh foundations and buried the remains of Deacon Brodie within. We were all three in a sweat by the time we'd finished. I sat myself down on a large stone and wiped my brow.

"Well, friends," I said, "it is only right and proper."

"What is?" Gisborne asked, breathing heavily.

"The old town has its serpent, and now the new town does too." I watched Gisborne put his jacket back on. It was the blue coat with silver buttons. There was blood on it, and dirt besides.

"I know a tailor," I began, "might make something fresh for an excellent price. . . ."

Next morning, washed and crisply dressed, I returned to my Lady's house. I waved the parcel under the servant's nose and he hurried upstairs.

My Lady was down promptly, but gave me no heed. She had eyes only for the book. Book? It was little more than a ragged pamphlet; its pages were thumbed, scribbled marginalia commenting on this or that entry or adding a fresh one. I handed her the tome.

"The entry you seek is towards the back," I told her. She looked startled. "You are, I suppose, the Masked Lady referred to therein? A lady for daylight assignations only, and always masked, speaking in a whisper?"

Her cheeks were crimson as she tore at the book, scattering its shreds.

"Better have the floor swept," I told her. "You wouldn't want Mr. Whitewood to find any trace. That was your reason all along, was it not? He is a known philanderer. It was only a matter of time

before he got to read of the Masked Lady and became intrigued to meet her."

Her head was held high, as if she were examining the room's cornices.

"I'm not ashamed," she said.

"Nor should you be."

She saw I was not mocking her. "I am a prisoner here, with no more life than a doll."

"So you take revenge in your own particular manner? I understand, Lady, but you must understand this. Two men died because of you. Not directly, but that matters not to them. Only one deserved to die. For the other . . ." I jangled the bag of money she'd given me that first night. "These coins will buy him a burial."

Then I bid her good day and left the whole shining new town behind me, with its noises of construction and busyness. Let them build all the mighty edifices they would; they could not erase the stain. They could not erase the real town, the old town, the town I knew so intimately. I returned to the howff where Gisborne and Mack awaited me.

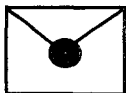
"I've decided," the young master said, "to study law rather than medicine, Cully." He poured me a drink. "Edinburgh needs another lawyer, don't you think?"

The image of Braxfield came unmasked into my mind. "Like it needs another plague, Master."

But I raised my glass to him anyway. ●

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SPARTAN GALLEY

by John F. Dobbyn

That first gust of air-conditioned chill pumped me back up to six foot one. I was a five foot seven inch pillar of perspiration by the time I slouched back to the law firm from a morning of combat in the arena of the Suffolk Superior Courthouse.

The second cold blast came when my secretary, Julie, waved hand signals of sympathy from the end of the corridor that meant that I was summoned to the office of senior trial attorney Alexis

Devlin—not in the category of good news for a firm associate.

The door was open. I saw the finger of Zeus point to a chair beside his desk. I accepted the “invitation.” As I entered, I noticed a wisp of smoke rising above the high-backed chair in front of him. He was either conferring with a smoking client, or one of the first-year associates had self-immolated.

As I crossed to my appointed place, I was stunned to see the lean, almost gaunt figure of Truman G. Newberry III, sitting with gangly legs crossed, behind the same smoldering cheroot he used to smoke in our undergraduate days at Harvard.

Tru and I weren’t actual brothers, but in a sense we shared the same father. Oddly enough, I first caught sight of Truman Newberry II in a courtroom. My own father had died in Vietnam before I was on solid food. My mother did what she could in a spicy Puerto Rican neighborhood, but by the age of six, my substitute father, mentor, and role model was the duke of a band of teen hoods called the *Coyotes*.

A graduate of Harvard Law School, John Dobbyn has refined his knowledge of criminal law through twenty-eight years on the faculty of Villanova Law School. The lawyers featured in this story are also the protagonists of Mr. Dobbyn’s first mystery novel, which has yet to be sold to a publisher but is already optioned for a TV movie. ¶

At the advanced age of fifteen, I had a juvenile rap sheet that convinced the juvenile court judge that this little menace should be tried as an adult on a particular grand-theft auto. Looking back, he was probably right.

The auto was a red Mercedes. The owner was one tall Brooks Brothers suit, sitting on the witness stand and laying a foundation for the next five to ten years of my life.

When the judge dismissed him as a witness, Truman Newberry II gave me an eye-to-eye scan that rippled my spine. He was halfway to the back of the courtroom when he turned and asked His Honor, "What're you going to do with him, Judge?"

The judge made reference to some hard time that would have had me seeing daylight in my early twenties. I was lost in a wave of despair of even living through it, when that same quiet voice uttered five words that made me whatever I've become.

"Let me take him, Judge."

I didn't know it then, but Truman Newberry II was the owner and hands-on proprietor of Newberry Stables, a gargantuan thoroughbred operation headquartered on the north shore of Boston. The Newberry colors were seen in those days in the winner's circles of more tracks than those of any stable outside of Kentucky or Ireland.

I learned that later. My view in those early days was limited to early morning mucking out of stalls that would make the Augean Stables look like a pony paddock. Then there was hay hauling, watering, and then back to mucking.

It may not have been freedom, but after the first few months it had something that no other form of incarceration could offer—self-worth. It was a new feeling.

Mr. Newberry was a hands-on boss, and I felt the tongue when I even thought of the old ways, but he was evenhanded with encouragement too, and, for the first time in my life, something I later recognized as respect. I can't pinpoint the day when that respect turned to the kind of affection that passes between a father and son.

When it was time, he sent his son, Truman III, to Phillips Academy. And he sent me right beside him. I worked so hard to impress him that I managed to get accepted to Harvard. He carried me through that one too. The final miracle was law school.

Life had carried Tru and me in different directions after college

graduation. I had hardly seen him from then until I saw him in that chair in Mr. Devlin's office.

Mr. Devlin suffered with thin forbearance the interruption of a warm handshake between old friends before jetting back to the relevant.

"Why was your father indicted for murder?"

I felt the breath squeezed out of my lungs.

"They're calling it, I believe, felony murder. They say he fixed a race by changing the medication of a horse. Spartan Galley. The change caused internal bleeding under the stress of the race. The horse dropped dead. The jockey was killed. Joey Preston. He was trampled by other horses after the fall. I can't believe that would be the same as murder."

"I'm afraid it would, Tru." I tried to say it softer than Mr. Devlin might, but there was no soft way. "If someone commits a felony, which could include race-fixing, and someone else dies as a result of it, it's the same as a first-degree murder charge."

Those lanky bones seemed to grow more concave under the weight of what he heard.

"Then my father's right. We need you, Mr. Devlin."

There was a fire that burned like a volcano in those seventy-whatever-year-old eyes when a case grabbed his interest.

"I've seen that horse, and at better tracks than Suffolk Downs."

"In his day, Mr. Devlin. He was five years old."

"That's not quite over the hill."

Tru made a maybe-yes, maybe-no gesture with his mouth. "Good race horses are prime athletes. Sometimes that edge can come and go without any obvious reason. You're right. He was Belmont class—Churchill Downs—the best as a two- and three-year-old."

Mr. Devlin leaned his barrel frame back in his desk chair. His eyes focused somewhere through the ceiling to another vision

"He was more than an athlete, Mr. Newberry. He was a gamer. I saw him on Derby Day at Churchill two years ago. One of the early races that day. A mile and a quarter. He came from the very back of the pack just before the final turn. That was his style. He passed everything in his way. There was finally just one horse ahead of him and seventy yards left. He'd spent everything he had. He won it on nothing but raw heart and courage. What happened to him after that race at Churchill?"

Tru shrugged those drooping shoulders. "Racing luck. Who

knows? One race he could beat Secretariat. The next week the edge'd be off, and he'd lose to horses he'd beaten before."

I noticed Mr. Devlin locked on Tru's eyes for the next question. I was beginning to recognize his nuances.

"Did the question of fixed races ever come up before this last one?"

Tru shook his head. "Never. If you follow racing, you know that horses have on and off days like any athlete. No cause for suspicion. It was just . . ."

"What?"

I was locked on now too.

"I don't know. I was raised around racing. Spartan's inconsistency was . . ."

"Out of the ordinary?"

I could see that Tru was groping for his own thoughts.

"Not really. Just . . . inconvenient. Spartan was the backbone of the stable. He kept the Newberry colors at Belmont and Hialeah. When he became inconsistent, the whole operation fell back to the level of Suffolk Downs."

I could see Mr. Devlin sifting it.

"Tell me about this race."

"It was three days ago. The fifth race at Suffolk. It was a mile and an eighth. There were nine horses in the race, but it was a two-horse race. Spartan and a horse called Gelido were clearly the class. The purse was fifty-thousand dollars. I know my father was counting on it. He was very tense before the race. I went down to the paddock with him for the saddling. Then we watched the race from the clubhouse."

"How was the horse in the paddock?"

Tru shrugged. "Normal. He was always high-strung before a race."

"Tell me about the race itself."

"Spartan broke out well. He went to the rail and just held onto the lead all the way to the first turn. Gelido's a frontrunner. He challenged for the lead up into the first turn, but Spartan held it. Halfway through the turn I saw his head go down. He was right in the path of the other horses. When they passed, Spartan was down on the track. The jockey, Joey Preston, was lying in a heap. He'd been badly trampled. The ambulance got right out there, but they were both dead."

Mr. Devlin was leaning on his hands, tapping his temples with his fingers.

"What made them suspect your father of fixing the race?"

"Do you know what lasix is, Mr. Devlin?"

"Sure. They give it to horses before a race if the horse has a tendency to bleed through the lungs during a race. It's a legal drug. There's nothing wrong with it. There's hardly a race run at Suffolk where some of the horses aren't on lasix."

"That's right. Well, Spartan Galley was a bleeder. He'd been on lasix for every race for the past three years."

"And?"

"When they did an autopsy on him they found no lasix in his system. They claim it was the lack of lasix that allowed the heavy bleeding in the lungs that killed him."

"Why does that point to your father?"

"My father had some vet training. He always administered the lasix intravenously to his horses himself a couple of hours before the race."

"So with the lasix withheld, Spartan Galley would be reasonably certain to bleed and lose the race. If he stood to win fifty-thousand dollars on the race, why would he deliberately lose?"

"The district attorney says he has evidence that my father placed a heavy bet on Gelido. My father couldn't be sure Spartan would win the race, given his past inconsistency. But if Spartan lost, it was a pretty safe bet that Gelido would win. At least as certain as it gets in racing."

Mr. Devlin cleaned up a few details, and Tru got up to leave. He set off a spasm of sympathy in the pit of my stomach as I watched that bewildered, hunched figure leave with no more hope than he brought in with him.

Mr. Devlin, on the other hand, got down to action before Tru had even cleared the door. He was alive with energy. He had the phone in his left hand, stabbing numbers with his right, and barking orders over his shoulder at me.

"Get over to the jail, Sonny. Talk to Newberry. Get his version. And check out that jockey."

I was on my feet. "Yes, sir. I'm on my way."

"Not yet. I want you to hear this."

He hit the speaker-phone button just as the receptionist at the district attorney's office picked up.

"Lex Devlin. Could you tell me who's on the Newberry case?"

That sweet voice sang beautiful music.

"Mr. Coyne is handling the Newberry case, Mr. Devlin."

I caught the beginning of a grin that cracked those granite features. Lex Devlin and Billy Coyne were warriors of the same vintage and code of combat. They had tangled spurs so often that mutual respect had grown into a deep affection that neither would be caught dead admitting.

"Would you put that old reprobate on the line?"

I could hear the grin in her voice as she said, "I'll see if he's in, Mr. Devlin."

It was ten seconds before the only voice I've ever heard that could scratch more gravel than Mr. D's boomed through the box.

"Lex Devlin? Do they still let that old codger near a courthouse?"

Mr. D was on his feet. "And he'll still be winning cases when you're too old to find the courthouse, Billy Coyne."

"Hell, Lex, I'm almost there now. I think they keep moving it on me."

They both laughed, and it was time for business.

"Bill, I'm representing Newberry."

"I figured."

"What makes you think he fixed the race?"

"You'll find out at the preliminary hearing, but I'll give you a preview. He says he gave the lasix shot to the horse as usual. The autopsy shows no lasix in the horse's system. Actually just the opposite. He'd been given heperin. It's an anticoagulant that actually prevents the bleeding from stopping. Result: Under the stress of the race, the horse dies of heavy internal bleeding, particularly in the lungs. Point two: Newberry placed a sizable, and I mean sizable, wager on the only other horse in the race that was likely to win."

"You mean Gelido."

"Right."

"That trouble you, Billy?"

Two seconds of silence, followed by, "Why?"

"Did Gelido win?"

"No. He fell over Spartan Galley when he went down."

"That's my point. Rather a stupid wager for an intelligent man, what?"

"You're groping, Lex. That's just racing luck."

"Then maybe you'll be kind enough to tell me what evidence you have that Newberry bet on Gelido."

"Why not? The police got an anonymous tip that Newberry placed the bet with a bookie in East Boston, Esto Seguiti. He's small change, but he runs a book for the big guys in the North End. We brought him into the grand jury, gave him immunity. He testified. He says your boy put a hundred grand on Gelido's nose."

"Have you checked the streets lately, Billy? Is he still alive?"

"He has no problem. I didn't press him for any other names. The boys in the North End aren't going to chill him for spilling on a guy named Newberry."

I was at Suffolk Downs by a quarter past twelve. Post time for the first race was one-thirty. On a cooler day, the jockeys would be lounging outside on the lawn in their undershirts, waiting until it was time to put on the colors for their first mount of the day. Fortunately, the heat drove them into the air-conditioned jockeys' room, where they clustered in little ethnic groups, the ones with Anglo names on one side and the Latinos on the other.

One of the choice benefits that I inherited from my parents was something of a split personality. My father was straight Anglo as far back as the Norman conquest. I could wear that persona to sip tea comfortably with the Queen. Equally easily, I can revert to my youth, slip a little salsa into my gait, and rap with the *muchachos* in the *barrio*.

On this occasion, I figured that being snow-white would be worth no points in loosening the tongues on the Anglo side of the room, but being a member of the tight minority might shake something loose on the other side. We spoke in the mellifluous *lingua* of Puerto Rico.

"Boys, I'll be up-front. I'm a lawyer. I represent the man who's charged with causing the death of a jockey, Joey Preston."

The cold glaze that came over some of the eyes at the mention of Joey's name was just what I wanted to see. I felt a number of curious eyes from the other side of the room at a name they recognized, but no problem. They had no idea what we were saying in Spanish.

My Latino conversants shifted around a bit uncomfortably for a moment before one of them broke the silence.

"What do you want, man?"

"Anything you can tell me."

Another one spoke up. "What can I say, man? He was a fast *hombre*."

"You mean with the horses? A good jockey?"

I saw some smiles break across faces that turned away.

The one who spoke last picked it up. "Fast with the cars, the life." He made a gesture that only another Puerto Rican would pick up as meaning that the deceased Joey Preston was living a style that required *mucho dinero* to sustain.

"Was he making the money as a jockey?"

That brought grins all around. "You know what the owners pay for a ride, man? Fifty dollars a ride. Maybe a few bucks extra if you win. You can pick up some extra cash riding workouts in the morning, but I never saw that dude around the track before noon."

"So what was it? Maybe fixing races?"

The eyes all hit the floor or the walls. The one who carried the ball before came through again. "How far is this going to go, man?"

"Right here. These walls. I'll never call you to testify. I just need to know."

I think hearing the words in Spanish gave them a stamp of believability.

"No one can tell you for sure. I'll tell you this. No jock ever lived his way on what he picked up over the table. There were times . . ."

"It's still in these walls, man. Give it to me."

"I've ridden against him in races when he was on Spartan Galley. I knew he had more horse than I did. You sense that. I expected him to blow by me on the outside. And he just hung. He lost the race. Not always, sometimes he'd win. But sometimes."

"*Gracias, amigos. Suerta.*"

The new lockup for Suffolk County stands in contrast to the old Charles Street jail much as modern heart surgery compares to the use of leeches—but it's still a lockup. When the man I came to think of as my father came through the grey door in that sterile, dehumanized interview room, I had all I could do to speak. The best I could do was, "Are you all right?"

He smiled and nodded. He held out a hand, but it wasn't enough. I hugged him, and for the first time, almost called him Dad. He returned the hug as if he'd wanted to do it for years.

The ice was broken. We could get down to business.

"Tru filled us in on most of the details. Just a couple of things

I'd like to go over. I know you usually inject the horses with lasix. Why didn't you do it this time?"

"I did."

"I don't understand. They found no lasix in his system."

He shook his head. "I injected lasix intravenously exactly two hours before race time."

"Did you fill the hypodermic yourself?"

"Yes. From a small rubber-capped bottle of lasix."

"What did you do with the hypodermic?"

"They're disposable. There's a waste disposal container for hypodermics and medical waste in the track stable area. I threw it in there. I'd finished the vial of lasix so I threw that in there too."

"Where do you keep the lasix?"

"We keep it in a locked cabinet in our suite of stables at the track."

"Who has access to the cabinet?"

"Myself, my trainer, Sonny Frank, that's about it."

"How about Tru?"

His expression showed surprise mixed with pain.

"It's just a question. I'm just asking before the D.A. does."

He nodded. "Yes. I guess he does."

Without taking that further for the moment, I plowed another field. "How long has Joey Preston been riding Spartan for you?"

He thought. "About three years. Sonny found him as an apprentice. He thought his style fit Spartan better than any jockey we'd used before."

"But apparently the best he could get was inconsistent results."

"Whenever he lost, there was a reason for it."

"Such as?"

"An off track. Slight stomach disorder. Poor rest. Excessive nervousness before the race. Different things. That's racing."

"And each time, how did you find out the cause of the loss?"

"From Sonny. He practically lived with the horse. He knew the fortunes of us all rose and fell with Spartan."

I didn't have to ask if he trusted Sonny, but I did.

"With my life."

I was working up to the one I didn't want to ask. I had to drop my eyes to get it out.

"In that race, did you place a bet on Gelido?"

He sensed my pain and made it easy. When I looked up, he was looking right in my eyes.

"Michael, I've never bet on a race in my life."

I tried to smile. "I'm sorry."

"I know. I'm glad you asked."

I found a phone and relayed the afternoon's gatherings to Mr. D. He took it all in without comment. I could hear his breath over the phone, so I assumed we were still connected.

When I finished, there were five seconds of dead time on the line. I knew that he was sifting, scanning, and reordering facts. When he broke the silence, I jumped.

He spit out a string of orders that had me writing faster than my wrists have moved since Professor Hart's class in Legal Process. My new assignments carried me back to the track just before the fourth race.

Fortunately, the name of Lex Devlin was neither unknown nor unsuspected in the track steward's office. Mr. D had cleared up a nasty bit of scandal before it ever left the confines of the track's office. Residual gratitude carried me directly into the chief steward's office, where my relayed requests met with nothing but cooperation. It could all have been done through court orders, but how sweet it is to see the wheels of justice oiled with the lubricant of gratitude.

One call from the chief steward gave me access to the medical waste disposal bin. Since it was picked up for shipment to a disposal site once a week, it still contained the waste from the day of Spartan's last race. I gathered in a sack all of the discarded vials of lasix and hypodermics, while the chief steward further accommodated us by rounding up the archived videotapes that Mr. Devlin had requested.

On the way back to the office, I dropped the lasix vials and hypodermics at a lab we frequently use for quick results. I was back in Mr. Devlin's office with an armload of videotapes by six P.M.

For the next three hours I fed videotapes of horse races into the mouth of a VCR, while Mr. Devlin drank in every frame like Cecil B. DeMille viewing the day's rushes. For the next four hours, we replayed everything we saw, while I marked and re-recorded on one tape the choice segments that Mr. Devlin picked out of each tape.

It was around one-thirty A.M. when we got a call from the lab confirming the fact that one of the vials labeled "lasix" and one of

the hypodermics contained the remains of nothing but a drug called heperin.

Mr. Devlin used up ten rings of the phone to get Bill Coyne out of bed, and five minutes of threatening, reasoning, and cajoling to get him into a frame of mind to listen. It was worth every bit of it.

The preliminary hearing was held in the criminal session of the Superior Court before the Right Honorable Clancy Hayes. Although Judge Hayes was still on the sweet side of senility, he was known around the bars encircling the courthouse as "Chancey" Hayes—a bit of an eccentric. We couldn't have drawn a better judge for an excursion into the unorthodox.

The prosecution's first witness was Esto Seguiti. Armed with the previously-granted immunity, little Esto admitted to book-making, at least to the extent of accepting a \$100,000 wager from Mr. Newberry on Gelido.

Mr. Newberry whispered to Mr. Devlin, "I've never seen that man in my life."

Mr. Devlin raised his hand the way I signal my Sheltie to stay. He rose to approach the witness for the cross-examination like a cat making friends with a canary.

I noticed that as he crossed to the witness stand he glanced around at the spectators in the courtroom. There were the usual courthouse groupies with a couple of unusual additions. Two massive size forty-eights in suits that encased muscles like overstuffed pepperonis filled a bench in the rear by the door. They appeared to be bored practically into a stupor.

Mr. Devlin started in a deceptively low key and built sharply.

"Mr. Seguiti, you're a bookie."

Mr. Devlin was smiling, but Seguiti braced.

"Right? You've got immunity. Speak freely."

"Yeah."

"And you work out of a little joint in East Boston, right?"

Another "Yeah."

"And you're telling us that in that little joint in East Boston you took a hundred-thousand-dollar bet."

Esto leaned slightly toward the judge for protection as Mr. Devlin came up beside the witness stand. From there he could look down on the perspiring pate of poor little Esto and keep an eye on the rest of the courtroom.

"You could handle that kind of action, Mr. Seguiti?"

There was an uncertain pause. "Yeah. One way or another."

Mr. Devlin hit the back wall with the next question.

"You mean you'd lay it off with the big boys in town, right?"

Esto was on the verge of panic. Mr. Devlin gave me a slight nod, and I fixed on the two bruisers in the back row. They came out of the stupor at that last question.

"Is that how you did it, Esto? Because you're straining my credibility to think you could handle a hundred thousand."

The sweat was making little rivers from Esto's temple to his jaw. Mr. Devlin looked to the judge, who was also awaiting an answer.

"The witness will answer the question. You have immunity, Mr. Seguiti."

Panic was in full outbreak. "Yeah, maybe."

Mr. Devlin leaned in for the kill. You could hear him in Chelsea.

"Who did you lay the bet off with, Esto?"

Poor little Esto was on his feet, which gave him an additional two inches. He was almost in tears when he yelled at Bill Coyne, "You said you wouldn't get into this!"

The judge made three cracks with the gavel and called a bench conference with counsel. One of the bozos in the back row flew through the back courtroom door, and I was on his tail. I followed him to the row of telephones at the end of the corridor. When I saw him talking into the mouthpiece, I went back into the courtroom. I gave the "right on" sign to Mr. Devlin, who brought peace back to the proceedings by withdrawing the question. In fact, he had no further questions of the witness. Poor Esto was three inches shorter when he scuttled off the stand and out of the courtroom.

Bill Coyne called Sonny Frank, the trainer of Spartan Galley, as his next witness. Sonny was a crusty, angular-looking man in his mid fifties.

Bill led him through the basics—i.e., Mr. Newberry owned Spartan Galley, Sonny was the trainer for the past three years, and Mr. Newberry was the only one who ever administered lasix to the horse.

But that was just the preliminary. The main event began when he turned Sonny over to Mr. Devlin for the cross-examination. When they passed each other, I thought I heard Bill Coyne whisper, "Score one for the Gipper."

Mr. Devlin waded in like a two-hundred-pound pit bull.

"Mr. Frank, you see that old codger at prosecution table? That's Billy Coyne, Deputy District Attorney Coyne. He's a curious old

goat by nature, and you've piqued his curiosity. He has this funny habit. When he gets curious, he goes to the grand jury."

Sonny's eyes never left Mr. Devlin as he circled the witness stand. He winced when Mr. D threw a file folder in front of him.

"Billy Coyne went fishing this morning with a subpoena from the grand jury. What do you suppose he hauled in?"

Mr. D nodded to the file. Sonny opened it and scanned the bank records of Joey Preston's checking account. My tip from the *muchachos* in the jockeys' room had borne fruit.

"Curious, isn't it, Sonny? There's a sizable deposit about every month over the last couple of years. Right?"

Sonny was glued to the sheets in front of him. "Right?" Sonny nodded.

"Speak."

"Yes."

Sonny jumped a second time when another file dropped in front of him.

"Recognize your own bank records, Sonny?"

Sonny's color was draining rapidly.

"You notice a bundle of money dropped into your account every time Joey got a payload? Now look at the strangest thing of all. Here's a list of every date over the last two years that Spartan Galley lost a race. Are you fascinated by the fact that you and Joey had paydays every time Spartan lost a race? The Deputy D.A. is."

Sonny just stared at the sheets in front of him. Mr. Devlin slid in closer.

"But you know what fascinates that old codger the most? The payments to Joey were going up in leaps and bounds while yours stayed about the same. Being the suspicious old goat that he is, Mr. Coyne figures little Joey was putting the squeeze on for more money every time he'd throw a race. That means he was squeezing whoever was buying the two of you. Are we hitting close to home?"

Mr. Devlin's eyes were riveted on the squirming Sonny Frank. I "accidentally" dropped a pencil to pull Mr. Devlin's attention to the back of the courtroom, where two more Sicilian Sumos joined the first two in the back row.

Mr. D slipped in close to the witness and whispered, "Those four bozos in the back row, friends of yours, Sonny-boy?"

Sonny went from fidgeting to a mild case of the shakes. Mr. D backed off and played to the back row.

"And who could it be that cared enough about Spartan Galley's losing to make a wealthy man out of little Joey Preston and pad your roll along the way? It had to be someone with enough clout to fix four or five horses in the same race, right? Because you can't fix a race with just one horse. Does that suggest the big boys in the North End?"

Sonny turned grey as he stared into the eight eyes in the back row that were now fixed on his every word.

"I can't hear you, Sonny. What's your thought on that?"

Sonny mumbled, "I got nothing to say."

"Really? Well, let's see if you have something to say about this. Your Honor, I'd like to roll a videotape that might shed some light on what really happened to Spartan Galley."

Judge Hayes approved.

I put in a videotape that ran in succession six random races of Spartan Galley over the past three years. They all brought to mind the race at Churchill Downs that Mr. Devlin had recalled the day that Tru had first come to the office. When they ended, Mr. Devlin picked up the grilling.

"Are these samples typical Spartan Galley races?"

Sonny's tone indicated that he felt he was on slightly safer ground. "That's right."

"And you were the trainer. You gave the jockey his instructions, right?"

"Of course." He said it with professional pride.

"Then let's see that next videotape."

I ran the tape of the race in which Spartan and Joey Preston died. I turned up the sound as the track race-caller announced, "They're off! Spartan Galley takes an early lead. Gelido second by a length . . ."

As they passed the grandstand, Spartan was on the rail, still a length ahead of Gelido and the pack. They stayed that way until halfway around the first turn, when Spartan went down. You could make out bodies tumbling as hooves struck the fallen pair. I cut off the VCR.

Mr. Devlin was six paces from the witness stand.

"That's the killer, Sonny-boy. That's what bothered me from the first time I heard about that race. In all of those previous races, Spartan Galley was a classic come-from-behind horse. He'd trail the pack for the first half of the race and then go after them. That's

how you trained him. But this time he jumped to the lead from the starting gate, following your instructions, Trainer Frank."

Mr. D was within an arm's length of the witness.

"Why, Sonny? Why on the lead? So the strain of beating the pack to the first turn would burst every blood vessel in his lungs? So he'd suffocate on his own blood and go down in front of the pack? So if Joey Preston somehow survived the fall, he'd be trampled by the horses behind him?"

"You're crazy. Mr. Newberry injected him with lasix so he wouldn't bleed."

"He thought he did. But you had access to the vials of lasix. You'd drawn out the lasix and filled the vial in front with heperin so he'd get the wrong drug, to accelerate the bleeding, didn't you?"

"If that horse got heperin, it was Newberry's doing. He was the only one who had anything to do with the injections."

"Really? If Mr. Newberry wanted to inject heperin, why wouldn't he just do it? Why would he draw lasix out of a vial, refill it with heperin, and then draw it out again into the syringe?"

Sonny grinned, but it was the grin of the desperate.

"You can't hang that on me. You're guessing."

Mr. Devlin leaned in. "You bet your sweet life I'm guessing. But do you know what that Billy Coyne is doing right now? He has grand jury investigators checking every source of heperin in every state in New England. What do you suppose he's going to think if he finds you bought heperin recently?"

Sonny's jaw locked, but it was the only part of his anatomy that wasn't shaking. Mr. Devlin played the next speech to the gallery.

"Mr. Frank, I do believe you'll be the next guest of honor before Mr. Coyne's grand jury. I'll even lay you even money you'll be looking at a murder-one indictment. You could luck out with a life term, but I wouldn't bet on that one."

Mr. Devlin let it sink in while he walked to where he could see the gang-of-four in the back row.

"On the other hand, Sonny-boy, let's think about this. Why was Joey Preston set up in the first place? I figure when Joey was squeezing for more and more money, the squeeze fell on the big boys in the North End, and they had enough of it. It looks to me like they gave the orders and you carried them out. You know what that means, don't you, Sonny-boy. You're small change in this picture. You'll probably get immunity so you can lay it on the big boys and save your skin."

The three of us—Mr. Devlin, Sonny, and I—watched as two of the silk-clad gorillas from the back row departed the courtroom. Mr. Devlin was close enough to whisper in Sonny's ear.

"There are two doors here, Sonny. There's that one in the back of the courtroom. My guess is that if you go through it, you'll have two of those apes in front of you and two behind by the time you hit the street."

The wobbling of Sonny's legs as he stood up indicated that he appreciated the situation.

"On the other hand, there's the door that leads to the judge's chambers. There are two federal officers waiting to take you into the federal witness protection program. Billy Coyne arranged it. It's your choice."

Sonny looked like Banquo's ghost when he took the first few steps toward the rear door of the courtroom. When he took the fourth step, the two remaining gorillas stood like the pillars of Hercules. Sonny's legs nearly buckled, but they propelled him into the judge's chambers like a cat with two steps on a pit bull.

I reached for Mr. Newberry's arm. He looked at me as if a glimmer of hope that he didn't quite understand had dawned. I was in full grin when I nodded.

"It's over. You're going home."

For the second time in our lives, it took a hug to say it. There were tears, but we were grinning like fools—my father and I.

That afternoon, the Boston heat broke, and so did Sonny before the grand jury. As a member of the witness protection program, he laid the whole scheme—from race-fixing to the ordering of Joey Preston's death—at the door of some seriously elevated members of the Boston chapter of that well-known Sicilian organization.

Mr. Newberry made final payment for services by check in Mr. Devlin's office the next day. Over handshakes, he tied the final loose end.

"How did you get those mobsters to sit in the back of the courtroom? Why were they interested in my preliminary hearing?"

"They weren't." Mr. Devlin loved to have the final word. "Billy Coyne and I got Judge Hayes to schedule your hearing between two arraignments of bookies from the organization. The big boys in the North End always send a couple of watchdogs to keep an eye on their boys on trial. We just had to get their attention."●

THE MAN WHO DROWNED IN CHAMPAGNE

by Edward D. Hoch

Some nights after dinner, when Leopold and Molly had a chance to relax and reminisce, she'd ask him about the cases he'd had before they met and married. "Something unusual," she'd urge, "that you never told me about before."

Leopold was retired now as captain of the city's Violent Crimes squad, but this night as they finished their wine he happened to remember a case he hadn't thought about in years. He held the glass of Chardonnay up to the light and said, "Well, there was the man who drowned in champagne . . ."

Readers in search of collected stories by Edward D. Hoch should be sure not to miss his latest book from Crippen & Landru Publishers, *The Ripper of Storyville and Other Ben Snow Tales*. There is no collection available yet of the Leopold tales, but Mr. Hoch faithfully returns to the popular detective every few months in *EQMM*. Leopold's latest episode is a reminiscence of a case long past. ¶

It was a Sunday morning in May when some early morning fishermen found his body on the river bank, about twenty feet from the water, wearing only his underwear and a pair of black socks. Though the body and clothing were dry, Lieutenant Fletcher immediately suspected death by drowning. "There are no wounds or abrasions on the body," he told Leopold, "and the man seems too young to have suffered a heart attack."

Leopold looked up from his pile of Monday morning reports. "How young?"

Fletcher gave a shrug. "I'd guess mid to late twenties. We don't have any identification yet. No missing person reports fit the description."

"What does the medical examiner say?"

"He's doing the autopsy now. We should have a report shortly."

It seemed like a routine death to Leopold, either accident or suicide, probably of no interest to the Violent Crimes squad. That was before Fletcher took the call from Quinn, the medical examiner. Then he yelled into Leopold's office, "Pick up line two, Captain. You'd better hear this!"

Leopold cut in on their conversation. "Dr. Quinn? What's the trouble?"

Quinn was an older man with a gruff voice. "That drowning victim from yesterday morning."

"So it was a drowning."

"Both lungs had fluid in them. There's no doubt that's what killed him."

"River water?"

"Well, no. I'm not certain till I finish analyzing it, but I think it might be champagne."

No one on the squad had ever heard of a person drowning in champagne. Sergeant Connie Trent thought it might be some sort of gangland thing, but nobody could say for sure. "You mean they fill a bucket with champagne and hold the guy in it upside down?" Fletcher asked with a snicker. Somehow it didn't seem too likely.

The autopsy report described a young man in his mid twenties, five feet ten inches tall, weighing 180 pounds. Death had occurred around midnight Saturday, give or take a few hours either way. Apparently he had been in good health at the time of death, though there was a bruise on his face. Despite the absence of most of his clothing, there was no indication of a sex crime. His blood alcohol level was .07, which meant he'd had a few drinks but was not legally drunk. There was a small amount of undigested food in his stomach. His hair was neatly cut and his fingernails had been recently manicured. He wore no jewelry. Whoever he was, he probably had a home and family. And yet a description in the following day's newspaper brought only one inquiry, from a woman whose forty-year-old husband had been missing for more than a year.

"We have no suspects," Leopold complained to Fletcher and Connie. "Until we can identify him, we're up against a stone wall. Have you sent his fingerprints in to Washington?"

Connie Trent nodded. "But if he has no criminal record and

never worked for the government or served in the armed forces, our chances are slim."

"Dr. Quinn has analyzed the stomach contents, but it doesn't tell us much," Fletcher said. "It was just a small amount of cake."

"Cake?" Leopold repeated. He gave it a moment's thought and said, "I want a list of all the weddings that were performed on Saturday, especially ones that had a formal reception Saturday night. Champagne and cake on a Saturday mean a wedding to me."

"The newspaper should have notices of most of them," Connie said. "I'll call around to the party houses too."

By Tuesday afternoon Leopold was staring at a list of fifty-five weddings from the previous Saturday. "That's a lot to check out," Fletcher grumbled.

"We can eliminate about half of them right away. The wedding cake is usually the last thing people eat at a reception. If it was still in his stomach at midnight, or even as early as nine P.M., that means an evening reception rather than an afternoon one."

"Makes sense," Connie agreed.

"If it was wedding cake," Fletcher reminded them.

Leopold reconsidered, but only for a moment. "The champagne makes it a pretty good bet. Connie, while you're checking out those evening receptions see if any of them had one of those champagne fountains where people can stick their glasses under the spouts to fill them. We're looking for a large one."

"Big enough for a head," Fletcher added.

Leopold was occupied for the rest of the afternoon with a shooting during an attempted bank robbery. By the time it was wrapped up he was ready to call it a day. Connie Trent was on the phone when he returned to the squad room, and she immediately motioned him over to her desk. She finished the conversation and triumphantly passed him her notepad. "Only two of Saturday's evening wedding receptions used large champagne fountains, big enough for someone's face to go in them."

"Just two?" He studied the names on the pad. *Gentely-Braxton* and *Conners-Smyth*.

"I think we can get it down to one. Rosie Smyth insisted on cheesecake for her wedding cake. I checked with Quinn. It wasn't cheesecake in the stomach."

"So that leaves Gentely-Braxton. Where was the reception held?"

"At Wyndom's Party House. That's about a mile from where the body was found."

He checked the following morning's schedule and found it clear. "If nothing comes up overnight I'll go out there with you in the morning."

The banquet manager was in his office when they arrived shortly before ten. His name was Mark Griswald, a stocky middle-aged man who looked like he'd seen it all. He listened a bit before saying, "I don't think I can help you. We had four wedding receptions on Saturday and I couldn't even tell you the family names now."

"This one was Gentely-Braxton, Saturday evening. A young man's body was found near the river and we believe he might have been a guest at the wedding."

When Connie spoke, Griswald remembered her voice. "You're the one who phoned about the champagne fountain."

"That's right."

Leopold produced a photo of the dead man. "Does he look familiar?"

He studied it for a moment. "You know, I might have seen him Saturday night but I can't be sure. Each reception had around two hundred people and I was in and out quickly, just checking with the brides' fathers to make sure everything was going smoothly. They're the ones paying the bills."

Leopold frowned at the names. "That would be Mr. —"

"Sidney Braxton. He owns a small winery near here. Believe me, the wine flowed freely at that reception. The champagne too, though that wasn't from his vineyard."

"I'd like to take a look at this champagne fountain, if that's possible."

Griswald nodded. "It's still in the room. We haven't used it since Saturday night."

He led Leopold and Connie through a plastic accordion door into a large banquet room. Some twenty bare tables, plus a head table, were still in place. In the center of the room, on a separate round table, stood a large silver centerpiece resembling a blossoming flower with several tiers. "This is it," the banquet manager explained. "It plugs into a socket in the floor. A small electric pump raises the champagne up through the center and it gushes out the top, running down through these various spouts on the side. The guests hold their glasses under the spouts to fill them. Several inches of champagne collect in the bottom and get recirculated to the top."

"Do many parties use it?"

"Not really. You can go through champagne awfully fast with one

of them, but being in the wine business, the bride's father insisted on it. I think they even sell smaller versions at his winery shop."

"How late did the reception last?"

"Eleven o'clock. That's standard for us. Our people need an hour to clean up and we like to lock up by midnight."

Leopold could see that the fountain was deep enough. He'd had cases where victims had been drowned in a few inches of water, if the killer held their face under for several minutes. "Were you still here after the guests departed?"

Griswald shook his head. "I stayed till around ten and then went home. Both receptions were winding down by then."

"Who was in charge of your cleaning crew Saturday night?"

"Well, the waitresses clear and strip the tables. That would be Rose Williams."

"Is she here now? Could we see her?"

"Sure." He walked over to a wall phone and pressed a button. "Rose, could you come into the north party room for a minute?"

Rose Williams was a slim black woman in her thirties who eyed them suspiciously until Griswald explained the reason for their visit. "Did you notice anything unusual Saturday night as the guests were leaving?" Leopold asked.

Rose shook her head. "Just what you'd expect. A purse got left behind but the woman came back to claim it. There was somebody's camera, too. I turned it in."

"What about this champagne fountain?"

"Yeah," she said, remembering. "It got tipped over. I thought it might be damaged but it seems okay. I ran some water through it."

"The champagne had spilled out?"

Rose nodded. "Usually we shut it off earlier, but the bride's father wanted it running right to the end. He's in the wine business."

"Who were the last ones to leave?"

"Oh, I couldn't tell you that. We were all in the kitchen by that time. I went in maybe quarter to eleven and the bride and groom were still there, dancing with a couple of the guests. The disc jockey was starting to pack up his stuff so I know it was about over. We came back in at eleven and the place was empty. That's a treat, not having to chase people out."

"The champagne fountain was tipped over then?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't hear any commotion?"

"The soundproofing in the rooms is pretty good, you know, so the music from one reception doesn't interfere with the other."

Leopold showed Rose the photograph. "Do you remember him?"

"He looks familiar," she answered, frowning at the picture. "But maybe he just looks like all the other white boys that age."

Leopold turned back to the manager. "I should talk to Mr. and Mrs. Braxton. Do you have their address?"

He smiled sadly. "They're divorced. We get a lot of that these days. I believe she was catching a plane back to California on Sunday. I think he lives at the winery. That's the only address I have."

Braxton Vineyard was a small winery on a country road about five miles north of the city. With his muscular arms and weathered skin, Sidney Braxton looked like a man who had worked outdoors all his life. He sat now in an office that seemed awash with wine bottles and colorful display material. On a shelf behind the desk was an obviously recent addition—a framed color photograph of his daughter in her wedding gown.

Braxton listened patiently to Leopold's account of the crime, then said, "I don't understand how you're linking this to Sue Ellen's wedding. Just because there's cake in his stomach and champagne in his lungs doesn't mean anything."

"A great deal of police work starts with a theory, Mr. Braxton," Leopold explained politely. Connie Trent was at his side but let him do the talking. "Have you spoken with the newlyweds since they left on their honeymoon?"

Braxton nodded. "Sue Ellen phoned me yesterday from their hotel in Washington. She said she and Rich are both very happy. They'll spend a few more days there and then go on a week's cruise of the Caribbean. It was my wedding gift to them."

"I understand they were dancing at the reception until the very end."

"I guess so. An old beau of my daughter's showed up from St. Louis and had a bit too much to drink. He kept wanting to dance with her."

"What's his name?"

"Wayne Flynn. She danced with him a few times. It was no big problem, except that he didn't want to leave. Kept stuffing himself with drinks and left-over hors d'oeuvres. And the man was dressed far too casually for a wedding reception."

"Where did the newlyweds spend the night?"

"They had reservations at a hotel near New York's La Guardia

Airport. They drove directly there after changing their clothes and caught a Sunday morning flight to Washington. I didn't see them after the reception but I know they got off all right. I picked up Rich's tuxedo and Sue Ellen's wedding gown Sunday morning at the party house and their luggage was gone."

"You must have a great many pictures of the happy event," Leopold said, motioning toward the bridal portrait.

"This was a studio shot taken two weeks ago for the newspaper. We had the entire wedding videotaped and that should be edited in a day or two."

"I might want to see that. In the meantime, would you mind looking at this picture of the murder victim? Do you remember him from the wedding, especially among those guests who stayed late?"

Braxton held the photograph in his hand for several seconds, staring at it stone-faced. Then he handed it back. "Nope, I don't recognize it. That's certainly not Wayne Flynn, if you were thinking it might be."

"All right," Leopold sighed. "Thanks for your time, Mr. Braxton."

As they walked back to the car, Connie Trent asked, "What do you think, Captain?"

"He knows more than he's telling. Let's see if we can get an address for Wayne Flynn in St. Louis. I want to find out if he ever made it back home."

By late afternoon Connie had found Wayne Flynn's phone number and talked to his roommate. He had not returned home or phoned since the wedding. "He was thinking of stopping in New York for a few days," Connie told Leopold, "so the roommate wasn't too worried. He did think he'd be hearing from him, though."

"Send a copy of the photo out there for identification purposes," Leopold said. He knew they were close to wrapping it up.

"Should we run it in tomorrow's paper?"

"No, I don't think we'll need that. Call around to the major Washington hotels and find out where Mr. and Mrs. Rich Gentely are registered."

Connie smiled. "I already did that while I was waiting for Flynn's roommate to get home from work. They have the bridal suite at the Van Buren."

"Call the airline and book us on a late flight tonight. Then call the Washington police and tell them we'll need their assistance."

"You want me along too?"

He nodded. "I'll need you to talk to her, if she's willing to talk."

They were at the Hotel Van Buren with a Washington detective by dawn the following morning. The detective rang the buzzer by the door and then knocked several times. Presently the door opened a few inches, still chained, and a sleepy young woman peered out at them. Leopold recognized her from the wedding portrait in her father's office. "Mrs. Sue Ellen Gentely?" He showed his identification. "I'm Captain Leopold of the—"

"I know," she said. "My father called. We've been waiting for you."

"And that was how it ended," Leopold said. "Very quietly. Not the stuff of those police TV shows at all."

"You mean they actually fought to the death at the end of that wedding reception?" Molly asked. "Over the girl Gentely had just married?"

"That's exactly what I mean. Of course her father recognized the photo at once, but he wanted to warn his daughter and give her a chance to escape. He realized it would have taken both of them to dispose of the body. It was headed for the river, of course, but the lights from a passing car frightened them and they left him on the shore with the champagne still in his lungs."

"They must have known he'd be identified before long."

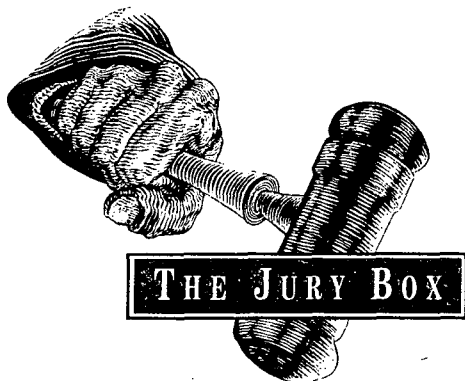
"They were only living for the present moment. A lot of young people do."

"Wayne Flynn still loved her, and that's why Gentely killed him."

Leopold shook his head. "No, Molly, you don't understand. The clothes were removed from the body because they were rented and had to be returned. The shoes were taken because they would have been too formal and new. Leaving the black socks was bad enough. Flynn's too-casual attire would hardly have included black socks. Just as Flynn, drinking and nibbling hors d'oeuvres, would have had more alcohol in his bloodstream and more than cake in his stomach. I've known grooms too nervous to eat their food, but they always have to eat a piece of wedding cake. Likewise, a groom is more likely than a guest to have a recent manicure. And the groom is one man who can disappear for days after a wedding without his absence being noted. Everyone assumed he was on his honeymoon, not down at the morgue."

"Are you telling me—?"

"Wayne Flynn won the fight at the end of the wedding reception and drowned the groom in that champagne fountain. Sue Ellen slipped the wedding ring from his finger and helped get rid of the body. Then she took Wayne with her on her honeymoon." ●



by Jon L. Breen

Some major fictional detectives take a while to build their reputations. For example, when P.D. James introduced London policeman Adam Dalgliesh in *Cover Her Face*, published in Great Britain in 1962, few realized a series of historic importance had begun—in fact, it took another four years for James's debut to be published in the United States. Other times, though, a new character in the mystery field is recognized from the first as something special. The first novel about American-Revolution-era midwife Hannah Trevor, the recently reprinted *Hearts and Bones* (Avon, \$5.99), was deservedly nominated for the Edgar for best novel of 1996. (Though the jacket copy and quoted reviews on Trevor's second case suggest otherwise, this was not her creator's first novel—Lawrence had published several present-day novels about

eccentric mystery writer Winston Marlowe Sherman, beginning with *Sweet Narcissus* [Bantam, 1990], under the pseudonym M. K. Lorens.)

Both Dalgliesh and Trevor are in excellent form in their eleventh and second book-length cases respectively.

**** P.D. James: *A Certain Justice*, Knopf, \$25. We learn in the first paragraph that barrister Venetia Aldridge, introduced in her element defending an accused killer in the Old Bailey, will become a murder victim, then spend the next hundred-plus pages learning how many of her associates in Chambers and elsewhere have motives for killing her. James's gifts for scenic atmosphere, classical plotting, suspense, and in-depth characterization are all displayed to advantage, and this is one 364-page detective novel that does not seem excessively

long. One mild objection: especially in the early pages, too much of the exposition in dialogue finds characters telling each other things they clearly already know. (Don't believe the *Publisher's Weekly* review of this novel quoted in Knopf's publicity: this is not a locked-room mystery.)

**** Margaret Lawrence: *Blood Red Roses*, Avon, \$23. In Rufford, Maine, of summer 1786, midwife Hannah, already threatened by the Orphanmasters Court with the loss of her deaf daughter Jennet, becomes a murder suspect when her husband, long missing and believed dead, turns up as a corpse in her lover's rose garden. Lawrence tells an interviewer in the Spring 1997 *Armchair Detective* that the acceptability in historical fiction of "a richness of language and detail, a lyricism" influenced her to turn to detection set in past times. Certainly beauty of style, with the third person narrative augmented by legal documents and selections from the protagonist's journal, is one of the key attributes to the Hannah Trevor novels, but careful plot construction, telling period details, and the character of the indomitable heroine herself are other factors that make the series special.

** Theodore Roosevelt Gardner II: *Flip Side*, Allen A. Knoll, 200

West Victoria, Santa Barbara, CA 93101; \$22. Gardner takes some facts reminiscent of the O.J. Simpson case, makes a Marlon Brando-type actor the defendant, and creates a courtroom scenario that will give aid and comfort to true believers on one side of the Simpson guilty-or-not debate. To say which side would tell too much, but I found the book totally unconvincing, albeit readable enough and including some decent trial action. (For a better piece of Simpson-inspired fiction, try William Bernhardt's early-1997 *Naked Justice* [Ballantine].)

A group of authors who vary widely in style and period—Cyril Hare, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Ross Macdonald, Charlotte Armstrong, Margaret Maron, Francis M. Nevins, Jr., and Robert Campbell among them—contribute dog mysteries to *Canine Crimes II* (Berkley, \$5.99), gleaned from the backfiles of *EQMM* and *AHMM* by Cynthia Manson. In *Simply the Best Mysteries* (Carroll & Graf, \$12.95), *EQMM* editor Janet Hutchings gathers 22 stories from this magazine, sixteen of them Edgar winners for best short story, the other half-dozen nominees. The stories, ranging in date from 1954 (Stanley Ellin's "The House Party") to 1995 (Jean B. Cooper's "The Judge's Boy"), include such

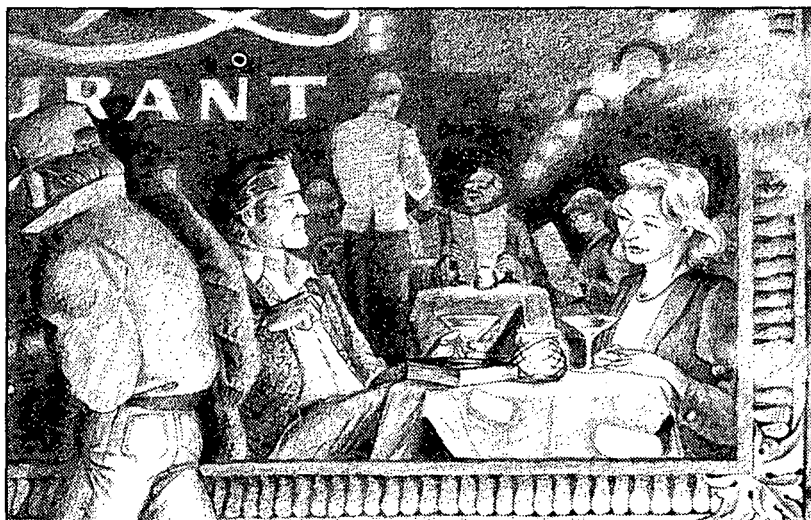
miniature masterpieces as Joe Gores's "Goodbye, Pops," Joyce Harrington's "The Purple Shroud," Ruth Rendell's "The Fallen Curtain," Thomas Walsh's "Chance After Chance," Barbara Owens's "The Cloud Beneath the Eaves," Clark Howard's "Horn Man," and Joseph Hansen's "The Anderson Boy."

The Mammoth Book of New Sherlock Holmes Adventures (Carroll & Graf, \$10.95), edited by Mike Ashley, is a 524-page bargain, including 26 pastiches, most original, and considerable editorial commentary linking the stories to the Holmes canon as set down by Arthur Conan Doyle. Most interesting is a nine-page selected bibliography of Sherlockian apocrypha. Two of the very best writers of mock Doyle, *EQMM*'s own Edward D. Hoch and Canadian novelist L. B. Greenwood, are present with solid new cases for the Baker Street sleuth.

Several years ago, Bill Pronzini wrote two critical volumes celebrating what he called "alternative classics" of mystery fiction, *Gun in Cheek* (1982) and *Son of Gun in Cheek* (1987). Now he has done the same service, with the same screamingly funny results, for western fiction in *Six-Gun in Cheek* (Crossover Press, 2333 Minneapolis Avenue, Minneapolis, MN

55406; \$15 trade paperback, \$50 signed limited hardback). A number of the writers whose wild-west ineptitude Pronzini celebrates—including famous names like John Creasey and forgotten ones like Anthony M. Rud and Ed Earl Repp—also wrote crime fiction. And anyway, isn't most western fiction also crime fiction? In a sportsmanlike gesture, Pronzini cites the "alternative" qualities of some of his own work and that of his sometime collaborator Jeffrey M. Wallman, but he fails to convince the reader that together or separately Pronzini and Wallman could write badly enough to compete with masters like Tom Roan and Lynton Wright Brent.

Fans of Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone series will want to read (and refer to) "*G*" is for Grafton (Holt, \$25), a guide to the biography, personality, and milieu of the Santa Teresa private eye as revealed in the alphabet series through "*M*" is for Malice (1996), by University of South Carolina scholars Natalie Hevener Kaufman and Carol McGinnis Kay. Though the Sherlockian approach (recounting every aspect of the subject's fictional world) has less appeal for me than would a full-scale biography or book-by-book critical study of Grafton, the authors have done what they set out to very well.



HOW FAR IT COULD GO

by Lawrence Block

She picked him out right away, the minute she walked into the restaurant. It was no great trick. There were only two men seated alone, and one was an elderly gentleman who already had a plate of food in front of him.

The other was thirty-five or forty, with a full head of dark hair and a strong jawline. He might have been an actor, she thought. An actor you'd cast as a thug. He was reading a book, though, which didn't entirely fit the picture.

Maybe it wasn't him, she thought. Maybe the weather had delayed him.

She checked her coat, then told the headwaiter she was meeting a Mr. Cutler. "Right this way," he said, and for an instant she fancied that he was going to show her to the elderly gentleman's table, but of course he led her over to the other man, who closed his book at her approach and got to his feet.

"Billy Cutler," he said. "And you're Dorothy Morgan. And you could probably use a drink. What would you like?"

"I don't know," she said. "What are you having?"

"Well," he said, touching his stemmed glass, "night like this, minute I sat down I ordered a martini, straight up and dry as a bone. And I'm about ready for another."

"Martinis are in, aren't they?"

"Far as I'm concerned, they were never out."

"I'll have one," she said.

While they waited for the drinks they talked about the weather. "It's treacherous out there," he said. "The main roads, the Jersey Turnpike and the Garden State, they get these chain collisions where fifty or a hundred cars slam into each other. Used to be a lawyer's dream before no-fault came in. I hope you didn't drive."

"No, I took the PATH train," she said, "and then a cab."

"Much better off."

"Well, I've been to Hoboken before," she said. "In fact, we looked at houses here about a year and a half ago."

"You bought anything then, you'd be way ahead now," he said. "Prices are through the roof."

"We decided to stay in Manhattan." And then we decided to go our separate ways, she thought but didn't say. And thank God we didn't buy a house, or he'd be trying to steal it from me.

"I drove," he said, "and the fog's terrible, no question, but I took my time and I didn't have any trouble. Matter of fact, I couldn't remember if we said seven or seven-thirty, so I made sure I was here by seven."

"Then I kept you waiting," she said. "I wrote down seven-thirty, but—"

"I figured it was probably seven-thirty," he said. "I also figured I'd rather do the waiting myself than keep you waiting. Anyway—"

1997 was notable for a large number of short stories by Lawrence Block. The following tale, originally written for a book to benefit literacy, is one of several we have been able to present to readers as a result of the author's concentration on short-story writing. Fans of the author's novels also have something new to dip into, however, the latest Bernie Rhodenbarr adventure, *The Burglar in the Library* (Dutton). †

he tapped the book "—I had a book to read, and I ordered a drink, and what more does a man need? Ah, here's Joe with our drinks."

Her martini, straight up and bone dry, was crisp and cold and just what she needed. She took a sip and said as much.

"Well, there's nothing like a martini," he said, "and they make a good one here. Matter of fact, it's a good restaurant altogether. They serve a good steak, a strip sirloin."

"Also coming back in style," she said. "Along with the martini."

He looked at her. He said, "So? You want to be right up with the latest trends? Should I order us a couple of steaks?"

"Oh, I don't think so," she said. "I really shouldn't stay that long."

"Whatever you say."

"I just thought we'd have a drink and—"

"And handle what we have to handle."

"That's right."

"Sure," he said. "That'll be fine."

Except it was hard to find a way into the topic that had brought her to Hoboken, to this restaurant, to this man's table. They both knew why she was here, but that didn't relieve her of the need to broach the subject. Looking for a way in, she went back to the weather, the fog. Even if the weather had been good, she told him, she would have come by train and taxi. Because she didn't have a car.

He said, "No car? Didn't Tommy say you had a weekend place up near him? You can't go back and forth on the bus."

"It's his car," she said.

"His car. Oh, the fella's."

"Howard Bellamy's," she said. Why not say his name? "His car, his weekend place in the country. His loft on Greene Street, as far as that goes."

He nodded, his expression thoughtful. "But you're not still living there," he said.

"No, of course not. And I don't have any of my stuff at the house in the country. And I gave back my set of car keys. All my keys, the car and both houses. I kept my old apartment on West Tenth Street all this time. I didn't even sublet it because I figured I might need it in a hurry. And I was right, wasn't I?"

"What's your beef with him exactly, if you don't mind me asking?"

"My beef," she said. "I never had one, far as I was concerned. We lived together three years, and the first two weren't too bad. Trust me, it was never Romeo and Juliet, but it was all right. And then the third year was bad, and it was time to bail out."

She reached for her drink and found the glass empty. Odd—she didn't remember finishing it. She looked across the table at him and he was waiting patiently, nothing showing in his dark eyes.

After a moment she said, "He says I owe him ten thousand dollars."

"Ten large."

"He says."

"Do you?"

She shook her head. "But he's got a piece of paper," she said. "A note I signed."

"For ten thousand dollars."

"Right."

"Like he loaned you the money."

"Right." She toyed with her empty glass. "But he didn't. Oh, he's got the paper I signed, and he's got a canceled check made out to me and deposited to my account. But it wasn't a loan. He gave me the money and I used it to pay for a cruise the two of us took."

"Where? The Caribbean?"

"The Far East. We flew into Singapore and cruised down to Bali."

"That sounds pretty exotic."

"I guess it was," she said. "This was while things were still good between us, or as good as they ever were."

"This paper you signed," he prompted.

"Something with taxes. So he could write it off, don't ask me how. Look, all the time we lived together I paid my own way. We split expenses right down the middle. The cruise was something else, it was on him. If he wanted me to sign a piece of paper so the government would pick up part of the tab—"

"Why not?"

"Exactly. And now he says it's a debt, and I should pay it, and I got a letter from his lawyer. Can you believe it? A letter from a lawyer?"

"He's not going to sue you."

"Who knows? That's what the lawyer letter says he's going to do."

He frowned. "He goes into court and you start testifying about a tax dodge—"

"But how can I, if I was a party to it?"

"Still, the idea of him suing you after you were living with him. Usually it's the other way around, isn't it? They got a word for it."

"Palimony."

"That's it, palimony. You're not trying for any, are you?"

"Are you kidding? I said I paid my own way."

"That's right, you said that."

"I paid my own way before I met him, the son of a bitch, and I paid my own way while I was with him, and I'll go on paying my own way now that I'm rid of him. The last time I took money from a man was when my Uncle Ralph lent me bus fare to New York when I was eighteen years old. He didn't call it a loan, and he sure as hell didn't give me a piece of paper to sign, but I paid him back all the same. I saved up the money and sent him a money order. I didn't even have a bank account. I got a money order at the post office and sent it to him."

"That's when you came here? When you were eighteen?"

"Fresh out of high school," she said. "And I've been on my own ever since, and paying my own way. I would have paid my own way to Singapore, as far as that goes, but that wasn't the deal. It was supposed to be a present. And he wants me to pay my way and his way, he wants the whole ten thousand plus interest, and—"

"He's looking to charge you interest?"

"Well, the note I signed. Ten thousand dollars plus interest at the rate of eight percent per annum."

"Interest," he said.

"He's pissed off," she said, "that I wanted to end the relationship. That's what this is about."

"I figured."

"And what I figured," she said, "is if a couple of the right sort of people had a talk with him, maybe he would change his mind."

"And that's what brings you here."

She nodded, toying with her empty glass. He pointed to the glass, raised his eyebrows questioningly. She nodded again, and he raised a hand and caught the waiter's eye and signaled for another round.

They were silent until the drinks came. Then he said, "A couple of boys could talk to him."

"That would be great. What would it cost me?"

"Five hundred dollars would do it."

"Well, that sounds good to me."

"The thing is, when you say talk, it'll have to be more than talk. You want to make an impression, situation like this, the implication is either he goes along with it or something physical is going to happen. Now, if you want to give that impression, you have to get physical at the beginning."

"So he knows you mean it?"

"So he's scared," he said. "Because otherwise what he gets is

angry. Not right away, two tough-looking guys push him against a wall and tell him what he's gotta do. That makes him a little scared right away, but then they don't get physical and he goes home, and he starts to think about it, and he gets angry."

"I can see how that might happen."

"But if he gets knocked around a little the first time, enough so he's gonna feel it for the next four, five days, he's too scared to get angry. That's what you want."

"Okay."

He sipped his drink, looked at her over the brim. His eyes were appraising her, assessing her. "There's things I need to know about the guy."

"Like?"

"Like what kind of shape is he in?"

"He could stand to lose twenty pounds, but other than that he's okay."

"No heart condition, nothing like that?"

"No."

"He work out?"

"He belongs to a gym," she said, "and he went four times a week for the first month after he joined, and now if he goes twice a month it's a lot."

"Like everybody," he said. "That's how the gyms stay in business. If all their paid-up members showed up, you couldn't get in the door."

"You work-out," she said.

"Well, yeah," he said. "Weights, mostly, a few times a week. I got in the habit. I won't tell you where I got in the habit."

"And I won't ask," she said, "but I could probably guess."

"You probably could," he said, grinning. He looked like a little boy for an instant, and then the grin faded and he was back to business.

"Martial arts," he said. "He ever get into any of that?"

"No."

"You're sure? Not lately, but maybe before the two of you started keeping company?"

"He never said anything," she said, "and he would. It's the kind of thing he'd brag about."

"Does he carry?"

"Carry?"

"A gun."

"God, no."

"You know this for a fact?"

"He doesn't even own a gun."

"Same question. Do you know this for a fact?"

She considered it. "Well, how would you know something like that for a fact? I mean, you could know for a fact that a person did own a gun, but how would you know that he didn't? I can say this much—I lived with him for three years and there was never anything I saw or heard that gave me the slightest reason to think he might own a gun. Until you asked the question just now it never entered my mind, and my guess is it never entered *his* mind, either."

"You'd be surprised how many people own guns," he said.

"I probably would."

"Sometimes it feels like half the country walks around strapped. There's more carrying than there are carry permits. A guy doesn't have a permit, he's likely to keep it to himself that he's carrying, or that he even owns a gun in the first place."

"I'm pretty sure he doesn't own a gun, let alone carry one."

"And you're probably right," he said, "but the thing is, you never know. What you got to prepare for is he *might* have a gun, and he *might* be carrying it."

She nodded, uncertain.

"Here's what I've got to ask you," he said. "What you got to ask yourself, and come up with an answer. How far are you prepared for this to go?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"We already said it's gonna be physical. Manhandling him, and a couple of shots he'll feel for the better part of a week. Work the rib cage, say."

"All right."

"Well," he said, "that's great, if that's how it goes. But you got to recognize it could go farther."

"What do you mean?"

He made a tent of his fingertips. "I mean you can't necessarily decide where it stops. I don't know if you ever heard the expression, but it's like, uh, having relations with a gorilla. You don't stop when you decide. You stop when the gorilla decides."

"I never heard that before," she said. "It's cute, and I sort of get the point, or maybe I don't. Is Howard Bellamy the gorilla?"

"He's not the gorilla. The violence is the gorilla."

"Oh."

"You start something, you don't know where it goes. Does he fight back? If he does, then it goes a little farther than you planned. Does he keep coming back for more? As long as he keeps coming back

for it, you got to keep dishing it out. You got no choice."

"I see."

"Plus there's the human factor. The boys themselves, they don't have an emotional stake. So you figure they're cool and professional about it."

"That's what I figured."

"But it's only true up to a point," he went on, "because they're human, you know? So they start out angry with the guy, they tell themselves how he's a lowlife piece of garbage, so it's easier for them to shove him around. Part of it's an act but part of it's not, and say he mouths off, or he fights back and gets in a good lick. Now they're really angry, and maybe they do more damage than they intended to."

She thought about it. "I can see how that could happen," she said.

"So it could go farther than anybody had in mind. He could wind up in the hospital."

"You mean, like broken bones?"

"Or worse. Like a ruptured spleen, which I've known of cases. Or as far as that goes, there's people who've died from a bare-knuckle punch in the stomach."

"I saw a movie where that happened."

"Well, I saw a movie where a guy spreads his arms and flies, but dying from a punch in the stomach, they didn't just make that up for the movies. It can happen."

"Now you've got me thinking," she said.

"Well, it's something you got to think about. Because you have to be prepared for this to go all the way, and by all the way I mean all the way. It probably won't, ninety-five times out of a hundred it won't."

"But it could."

"Right. It could."

"Jesus," she said. "He's a son of a bitch, but I don't want him dead. I want to be done with the son of a bitch. I don't want him on my conscience for the rest of my life."

"That's what I figured."

"But I don't want to pay him ten thousand dollars, either, the son of a bitch. This is getting complicated, isn't it?"

"Let me excuse myself for a minute," he said, rising. "And you think about it, and then we'll talk some more."

While he was away from the table she reached for his book and turned it so she could read the title. She looked at the author's

photo, read a few lines of the flap copy, then put it as he had left it. She sipped her drink—she was nursing this one, making it last—and looked out the window. Cars rolled by, their headlights slightly eerie in the dense fog.

When he returned she said, "Well, I thought about it."

"And?"

"I think you just talked yourself out of five hundred dollars."

"That's what I figured."

"Because I certainly don't want him dead, and I don't even want him in the hospital. I have to admit I like the idea of him being scared, really scared bad. And hurt a little. But that's just because I'm angry."

"Anybody'd be angry."

"But when I get past the anger," she said, "all I really want is for him to forget this crap about ten thousand dollars. For Christ's sake, that's all the money I've got in the world. I don't want to give it to him."

"Maybe you don't have to."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think it's about money," he said. "Not for him. It's about sticking it to you for dumping him, or whatever. So it's an emotional thing and it's easy for you to buy into it. But say it was a business thing. You're right and he's wrong, but it's more trouble than it's worth to fight it out. So you settle."

"Settle?"

"You always paid your own way," he said, "so it wouldn't be out of the question for you to pay half the cost of the cruise, would it?"

"No, but—"

"But it was supposed to be a present, from him to you. But forget that for the time being. You could pay half. Still, that's too much. What you do is you offer him two thousand dollars. I have a feeling he'll take it."

"God," she said. "I can't even talk to him. How am I going to offer him anything?"

"You'll have someone else make the offer."

"You mean, like a lawyer?"

"Then you owe the lawyer. No, I was thinking I could do it."

"Are you serious?"

"I wouldn't have said it if I wasn't. I think if I was to make the offer he'd accept it. I wouldn't be threatening him, but there's a way to do it so a guy feels threatened."

"He'd feel threatened, all right."

"I'll have your check with me, two thousand dollars, payable to him. My guess is he'll take it, and if he does you won't hear any more from him on the subject of the ten grand."

"So I'm out of it for two thousand. And five hundred for you?"

"I wouldn't charge you anything."

"Why not?"

"All I'd be doing is having a conversation with a guy. I don't charge for conversations. I'm not a lawyer, I'm just a guy owns a couple of parking lots."

"And reads thick novels by young Indian writers."

"Oh, this? You read it?"

She shook her head.

"It's hard to keep the names straight," he said, "especially when you're not sure how to pronounce them in the first place. And it's like, if you ask this guy what time it is he tells you how to make a watch. Or maybe a sundial. But it's pretty interesting."

"I never thought you'd be a reader."

"Billy Parking Lots," he said. "Guy who knows guys and can get things done. That's probably all Tommy said about me."

"Just about."

"Maybe that's all I am. Reading, well, it's an edge I got on just about everybody I know. It opens other worlds. I don't live in those worlds, but I get to visit them."

"And you just got in the habit of reading? The way you got in the habit of working out?"

He laughed. "Yeah, but reading's something I've done since I was a kid. I didn't have to go away to get in that particular habit."

"I was wondering about that."

"Anyway," he said, "it's hard to read there, harder than people think. It's noisy all the time."

"Really? I didn't realize. I always figured that's when I'd get to read *War and Peace*, when I got sent to prison. But if it's noisy, then the hell with it. I'm not going."

"You're something else," he said.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. The way you look, of course, but beyond the looks. The only word I can think of is class, but it's a word that's mostly used by people that haven't got any themselves. Which is probably true enough."

"The hell with that," she said. "After the conversation we just had? Talking me out of doing something I could have regretted all my life, *and* figuring out how to get that son of a bitch off my back

for two thousand dollars? I'd call that class."

"Well, you're seeing me at my best," he said.

"And you're seeing me at my worst," she said, "or close to it. Looking to hire a guy to beat up an ex-boyfriend. That's class, all right."

"That's not what I see. I see a woman who doesn't want to be pushed around. And if I can find a way that helps you get where you want to be, then I'm glad to do it. But when all's said and done, you're a lady and I'm a wiseguy."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do."

"Yes, I guess I do."

He nodded. "Drink up," he said. "I'll run you back to the city."

"You don't have to do that. I can take the PATH train."

"I've got to go into the city anyway. It's not out of my way to take you wherever you're going."

"If you're sure."

"I'm sure," he said. "Or here's another idea. We both have to eat, and I told you they serve a good steak here. Let me buy you dinner, and *then* I'll run you home."

"Dinner," she said.

"A shrimp cocktail, a salad, a steak, a baked potato—"

"You're tempting me."

"So let yourself be tempted," he said. "It's just a meal."

She looked at him levelly. "No," she said. "It's more than that."

"It's more than that if you want it to be. Or it's just a meal, if that's what you want."

"But you can't know how far it might go," she said. "We're back to that again, aren't we? Like what you said about the gorilla, and you stop when the gorilla wants to stop."

"I guess I'm the gorilla, huh?"

"You said the violence was the gorilla. Well, in this case it's not violence, but it's not either of us, either. It's what's going on between us, and it's already going on, isn't it?"

"You tell me."

She looked down at her hands, then up at him. "A person has to eat," she said.

"You said it."

"And it's still foggy outside."

"Like pea soup. And who knows? There's a good chance the fog'll lift by the time we've had our meal."

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised," she said. "I think it's lifting already." ●

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Because It Was There

BY PETER LOVESEY

Wee Betty Pope

BY PETER TURNBULL

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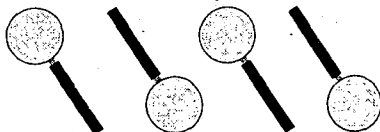
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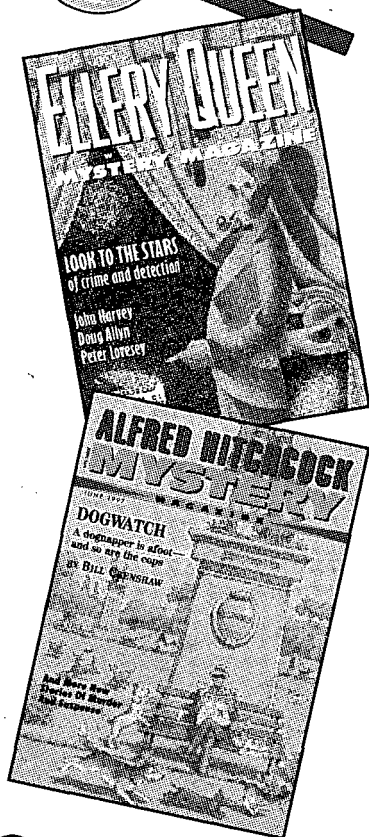
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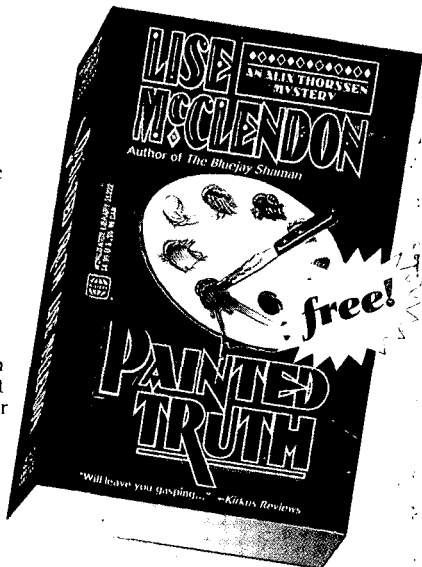
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